

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

TRANSNATIONAL SVĀMINĀRĀYAṆ HINDUISM: MASS MEDIATION AND THE RISE  
OF BAPS

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ANDREW CARL KUNZE

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For John and Peggy Kunze, who let me wander far from home, and the memory of Christopher Lee Kunze (1982—2019), who always drew me back.

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# Transnational Svāminārāyaṇ Hinduism: Mass Mediation and the Rise of BAPS

Andrew Carl Kunze

## Abstract

This dissertation studies the role of mass mediation in the transnational growth of one Svāminārāyaṇ Hindu organization, called BAPS (Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Sanstha), through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It argues that the sacred figure of the BAPS guru is now constituted by and dependent upon the institutional media apparatus built around him. The dissertation focuses on *sevā* (devotional service) in media technologies as a practice of guru worship that manifests the guru's spiritual presence and powers for his devotees, the Gujarati press, Indian political discourse, and the Hindu diaspora.

Chapter 1 contextualizes the life and teaching of Sahajānand Svāmī, the founder of the Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy, within his South Asian religious milieu of theistic Vedānta, Gujarati codes of conduct, North Indian Kṛṣṇa bhakti, Sufi-inflected piety, and British interests in reform. Sahajānand's early Sampradāy was a bricolage of diverse religious sources that gave rise to a variety of sectarian interpretations, and the rest of the dissertation is the story of how one sect claimed and codified his teaching. Chapter 2 argues that BAPS was only able to be recognized as "Svāminārāyaṇ" when it entered a "literary and academic public outside of India" through its Gujarati- and English-language publications for the Gujarati diaspora. Its monthly magazine *Svāminārāyaṇ Prakāś* and weekly newsletter *Satsaṅg Patrikā* rendered the guru spiritually omnipresent around his growing transnational network. Chapter 3 examines how BAPS uses publicity work as a form of *sevā* to popularize the perception that its guru inherited Sahajānand Svāmī's spiritual authority and to promote him as an international ambassador for Hinduism. Chapter 4 studies BAPS' "Satsaṅg Exam" program that trains and vets new devotees and it argues

that the rigors and stresses of standardized testing give devotees a new experience of the guru's omniscience as an objective assessment of their devotional merit. Finally, Chapter 5 analyzes the labor of BAPS' devotee tech workers who foster an ascetic relationship with alluring new media and generate a perception of the guru's divine foresight as he assigns theological value to future technological power.

The dissertation analyzes BAPS' history of mass mediation as an example of how transnational Hinduism is now a center of innovation that exerts influence over Indian Hinduism. BAPS increased its mass mediation in response to transnational growth and fractures, first in East Africa, then in the UK, and the US. A centralized BAPS standardized these innovations for its Indian devotees as well, normalizing the diaspora's mass mediated relationship to the guru. Further, the guru's transnational media institution also engenders widespread support for Hindu Nationalism, both in India and abroad. Devotees regularly mediate and consume an essentialized vision of an eternally Hindu India, and the institution is expanding its role as Hindu ambassadors in the BJP's informal diplomacy.

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## Note on Transliteration

I have transliterated most Sanskrit words in this dissertation according to the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST). I have transliterated Gujarati words with an adapted form of the IAST that drops many short ‘a’ vowels, especially at the end of words, and adds a tilde over nasalized vowels that do not occur in Sanskrit. While Sanskrit and Gujarati do not have capital letters, I use capitalization to signify proper nouns and names. I pluralize Sanskrit and Gujarati words with an English ‘s’ at the end, instead of their original plural forms. I have chosen not to italicize Sanskrit or Gujarati words as to avoid unnecessarily separating them from the rest of the dissertation’s vocabulary. When I quote from other sources using Sanskrit or Gujarati words, I retain their original transliteration and italicization choices. I provide a working translation for each Sanskrit or Gujarati word in parentheses after its first appearance in each chapter. I have chosen not to include diacritic marks for the names of cities and neighborhoods, contemporary people (roughly since 1900 to present), or specific institutions. In these cases, I follow either standard English transliteration or the transliteration used by those people and institutions in their own English-language self-representation.

All translations of Gujarati texts and conversation are my own, unless otherwise indicated. I provide a transliteration of the original Gujarati text for each translation of a printed source in an accompanying footnote.

Introduction:  
Media Sevā and Transnational Hinduism



*Figure 0.1: Mahant Swami Maharaj (second from left) performing pūjā on stage in the Rajkot BAPS sabhā hall, 6:30 a.m. on May 29, 2018. He is assisted by a young sādhu, to the left, and seated on an ornate golden throne. His backdrop is an image of BAPS' famous Akshardham temple in New Delhi and its giant central image of Bhagvān Svāmīnārāyaṇ. Four BAPS devotees and media sevaks (right) capture every detail and broadcast it live, around the temple complex on closed-circuit television and internationally via their website. Their media is also posted later to the BAPS website in photo galleries and a video compilation. Photo by author.*

### *Mass Mediation and the Rise of BAPS*

In May of 2018, I interviewed Mahant Swami Maharaj, the guru of BAPS (Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Sanstha), at their temple in Rajkot, Gujarat. The morning before we spoke, I arrived in the Rajkot sabhā (assembly) hall before 6:00 a.m. and watched Mahant Swami's morning pūjā, (worship ritual), for around two hours, along with several thousand BAPS devotees packed into the hall. In 2018 and 2018, I watched Mahant Swami's pūjā around two dozen times, mainly in Ahmedabad, Gujarat and the Chicago suburb of Bartlett, Illinois. His ritual performance that morning in Rajkot was no different than the previous times; Mahant Swami's pūjā is virtually the same every day. The main differences are the daily customized decorations and the music that devotees perform around him, all forms of sevā (devotional service). Another constant of his

morning pūjā was the presence of cameras and cameramen surrounding the guru. Besides the thousands of smartphone cameras in the audience, BAPS media sevaks (those who give sevā) were granted stage access to photograph and video-record every moment of the ritual worship, as seen in Figure 1. Their video feed was broadcast live on the BAPS website and on CCTV around the temple complex, and their photos were posted online later that day.

When I sat down with Mahant Swami that afternoon, I referred to the media sevaks and asked, “People are constantly taking photos of you. How does that feel?” He answered that the photos’ purpose was to bring joy and advance the faith of devotees. The photos are sevā to help one become a servant of God, he said. The answer was not especially surprising. By that time, I knew that mass mediation was an important connection between the BAPS guru and devotees. I was familiar the history of Mahant Swami’s predecessor, Pramukh Swami Maharaj, who led BAPS from 1971 until his death in 2016. I knew that Pramukh Swami used mass mediation spectacularly well to expand BAPS through East Africa, the UK, and the US and formalized media work as a form of devotional service for his followers. However, I also knew that Mahant Swami was quite different from Pramukh Swami and that he often seemed less comfortable in the limelight. He alluded to this in his answer, saying “I have no interest in it [...] There isn’t any self-interest.” I wondered why, as the head of the institution, he chose not to reel back BAPS’ production of guru mediations. I asked if the media attention felt strange to him. Mahant Swami smiled at my question and said, “What... who can stop this?” We both laughed, and he reiterated “I tried to stop it.”

If anyone, I thought, *he* could stop the mass mediation. His spiritual authority is absolute within BAPS. He is the cameramen’s guru, and they will always follow his directions. On one level, Mahant Swami’s comment recognized the cameramen’s enthusiasm for media sevā and expressed a reticence in denying them the experience. BAPS media sevaks have mentioned to me,

both in the US and India, that their favorite part of the sevā is being allowed so physically close to the guru, a rare opportunity for the average devotee in such a massive organization. Some describe standing next to the guru and recording his worship as the most intense spiritual experience of their lives. But on another level, Mahant Swami's answer signaled something distinctive about the transnational organization of BAPS and other global guru-led movements, in which mass mediation is the linchpin of a transnational guru's spiritual authority. For the vast majority of their lives in BAPS, devotees solely encounter the guru through his mass mediations. The work of media sevaks, like these cameramen, is a crucial process in the production and popular perception of a guru's spiritual powers. Throughout my fieldwork, and especially at moments like this interview with Mahant Swami, I began questioning my top-down assumptions of how guru authority functioned within the BAPS media institution. I wondered if Mahant Swami actually had tried and failed to stop the cameramen's sevā. Was he able to curb, or even dismantle, the BAPS media apparatus? Or was the guru somehow dependent upon it, or stuck inside it?

This dissertation tracks the rise of BAPS from a rural Svāminārāyaṇ off-shoot to what it is now, the largest Hindu organization in the US and one of the most influential around the world. A central argument of this dissertation is that the work of mass mediation is generative of a guru's spiritual authority, and, from a bottom-up perspective, the devotees who produce these media make his divine persona present and transcendent in these new technological forms. Newsletters, newspaper articles, standardized tests, websites, and smartphone apps enable the guru to connect with millions of devotees in a manner that is mass scalable and mass reproducible for his organization. This dissertation is more concerned with the devotional labor, or sevā, in the mediation process than with their media products per se. These mediation projects have transformed BAPS into a transnational institution, the scale of which all but guarantees that most

of the guru's devotees will never experience direct, personal contact with him. As many scholars in Hindu studies have argued, including Jacob Copeman and Aya Ikegame, it is the guru's close distance, their paradoxical accessibility and unattainability that upholds their authority and charisma over their followers.<sup>1</sup> This dissertation examines how such a relationship with the guru is institutionalized through the work of mass mediation.

This research suggests that in transnational Hinduism, the divine entity known as "the guru" extends far beyond their individual human body and throughout the institutional media apparatus that connects them with devotees around the world. The transnational guru is now, in part, the media institution built around him, and the labor of his staff and volunteers actualize his divine powers. Weekly newsletters that structure programming for BAPS' devotional assemblies distribute the guru's omnipresence around their transnational network. His public representation as a holy figure in the press generates his spiritual authority over the Svāminārāyaṇ movement. The standardized testing system that trains tens of thousands of devotees every year manifests his divine omniscience. Tech workers create the perception of his divine foresight by constantly updating his media and keeping him on the cutting-edge of new digital technologies. The bureaucracy of BAPS has become part of what their modern, transnational guru is; their salaried staff and volunteer sevā departments become the extensions of his divine persona that touch devotees around the globe. In recent decades, his spiritual powers have grown as a result of BAPS' burgeoning capacity to reach and manage massive numbers of transnational devotees.

In this introduction, I argue that a transnational guru is created through their media institution. I briefly describe my fieldwork and research in the wider Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy

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<sup>1</sup> Jacob Copeman and Aya Ikegame, "The Multifarious Guru: An Introduction," in *The Guru in South Asia: New Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Jacob Copeman and Aya Ikegame (London: Routledge, 2014), 25.

and my choice to focus on BAPS to explore this topic. I lay out the two main fields in which this research contributes to scholarly understanding. First, in the area of Religion and/as Media, I foreground the importance of media work, or *sevā*, as an arena of religious practice in service of cultivating a devotional sensorium. Second, in the field of diasporic studies, I argue that transnational Hinduism has become a center of influence in the Hindu world. Many of the mass-mediated devotional practices and structures have come back to alter Hindu communities in India. Before laying out these arguments on the guru, media *sevā*, and transnational Hinduism, I begin by briefly describing BAPS' position within the wider Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy.

The Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy has never been a fully unified community, and its experiences with mass mediation and mass migration outside of India have given rise to new waves of guru-led factions. The Sampradāy was originally conceived as a bifurcated community, divided north and south. Its founder, Sahajānand Svāmī (1781—1830), established the Sampradāy with two independent and officially coequal “gādis” (“thrones,” diocese or principalities). In 1826, he issued a legal document known as the *Deś Vibhāgno Lekh* (Letter on the Division of Land). The *Lekh* established a northern gādi, called the Nar-Narayan Dev Gadi, based in the city of Ahmedabad; and a southern gādi, called the Lakshmi-Narayan Dev Gadi, based in the town of Vadatal.<sup>2</sup> Chapter One introduces the formation of the early Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy in much greater detail. For now, it is sufficient to note the *Deś Vibhāgno Lekh* only covered South Asian geography, from the shores of the Arab Gulf in the West to Calcutta in the East, from the Himalayas in the north, to the southern tip of the peninsula. The arrival of print culture in Gujarat supported Svāminārāyaṇ factions around the turn of the twentieth century, as new devotional

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<sup>2</sup> Sahajānand Svāmī, *Śrī Deś Vibhāgno Lekh*, ed. Shastri Ghanshyamswarupadasji (Ahmedabad: Gujarat Printing Press, 1978).

communities published pamphlets and monthly magazines, some of which openly challenged the Ācāryas' authority.<sup>3</sup> Then, beginning in the 1920s, mass migration of Kutchis and Gujaratis outside of South Asia thus posed a challenge to the original Svāminārāyaṇ gādis when devotees began living outside the limits of the *Lekh*. Renunciant Svāminārāyaṇ gurus, leading their own organizations, quickly followed the migration patterns to East and South Africa after the 1920s, then to the US and UK in the 1960s and 70s.

The Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy of today is a vast Gujarati Vaiṣṇava bhakti community, with at least a dozen major organizations and many more small guru followings, which I have studied since 2011. My first encounter with the Sampradāy came in April and May of 2011 when I undertook a month-long research project in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. During that time, I became acquainted with three prominent Svāminārāyaṇ organizations based in three different areas of Ahmedabad: the original Nar-Narayan Dev Gadi based at the Kalupur temple, the Swaminarayan Gadi Sanstha based in the Maninagar temple, and BAPS based in its Shahibaug temple. I returned to Ahmedabad for Gujarati language studies in the summers of 2013, 2014, and 2016 and maintained my contacts in each of the three groups. In the summer of 2017, I also attended the ten-day festivities for Mahant Swami's first visit as the new guru to the Chicago-area BAPS temple in Bartlett, IL. However, the bulk of my ethnographic research took place over a twelve-month period in fieldwork in 2018. I spent the first six months in Gujarat and the second six months in the US, mostly in the Chicago suburbs, and in Virginia and New Jersey. Over that time, I worked with nine different Svāminārāyaṇ organizations: the three mentioned above, including their American temple organizations; and the original Lakshmi-Narayan Dev Gadi based Vadtal, with its two

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<sup>3</sup> Arun Brahmabhatt, "Scholastic Publics: Sanskrit Textual Practices in Gujarat, 1800-Present," PhD diss., (University of Toronto, 2018), 91—100.

divided American temple organizations in Wheeling and Palatine, IL; the Swaminarayan Gurukul Vishvavidya Pratishtanam (SGVP) based in Ahmedabad; the Swaminarayan Gurukul Rajkot Sansthan at their temple in Arlington Heights, IL; the Swaminarayan Mandir Vasna Sanstha (SMVS) with its temples in Ahmedabad, Gandhinagar, and Bartlett, IL; and the Yogi Divine Society at its temple in Des Plaines and center in Waukegan, IL.

Of these many Svāminārāyaṇ organizations, why do I choose to write about BAPS? The choice could be seen as redundant since BAPS dominates academic discussions of the Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy, while most other Svāminārāyaṇs remain vastly underrepresented. And yet, the story of how BAPS became so dominant is precisely what I hope to explain. BAPS was one of the guru-led organizations that flourished in the Gujarati diaspora, and mass mediation was key to this growth. More than any other Svāminārāyaṇ group, BAPS organized and educated its devotional communities through mass mediation. From the 1970s onward, Pramukh Swami created a model of curated guru publicity that produced continually positive coverage of him and his organization in the press. BAPS conducted mass festivals in the 1980s and 90s that proved effective for recruiting new members. They also host academic conferences, which continue to the present. BAPS' constant churn of new publications, and English translations of old ones, make it the most accessible Svāminārāyaṇ group to western journalists and academics, with or without access to the Gujarati-language materials. Their mass events and meticulous public representation make the organization intriguing for many and an exemplary case of the media institutions that have become vital for transnational gurus.

During fieldwork, I explored how mass media like newsletters, magazines, and press coverage constructed the BAPS guru's divinity and expanded his institution. In addition to my archival research into BAPS' twentieth-century media, I planned to speak with "average" BAPS

devotees on how they received and internalized its contemporary mediations. I quickly found that BAPS PR representatives promptly took up most of my requests for interviews. I sensed that our conversations were sticking within the guard rails of the official BAPS script, with answers that were vetted and rehearsed beforehand. Every example that came up seemed to portray BAPS in the most glowing and altruistic of terms. Early on, I was frustrated by these canned responses; I saw them as a façade that inhibited my access to the authentic insides of BAPS. However, at a certain point, I decided to embrace the PR as the ethnographic material itself, seeing the construction and maintenance of the public image as a central function of religious practice. I became less concerned if interviewees were “sticking to the script” and more interested in what they did with that script, why it mattered to them, and how it impacted their lives. I realized that the work of PR was a spiritually satisfying practice of *sevā* for many devotees, which helped me understand a key insight of my fieldwork, that mass mediation is also an arena of devotional participation and guru worship. This insight helps me rethink the relationship between transnational gurus and their devotee institutions.

### *Institutional Gurus*

Studies of wide-spread guru-led movements regularly point to a guru’s blend of personal charisma with Hindu tradition to understand their popularity and growth. Scholars often explain a guru’s spiritual authority with reference to their charisma: their exceptional skills of oratory,<sup>4</sup> their

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<sup>4</sup> See for example studies of the guru Amritanandamayi Ma, or Amma: Maya Warrier, *Hindu Selves in a Modern World: Guru Faith in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2005); Amanda Lucia, *Reflections of Amma: Devotees in a Global Embrace* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014)

gifts of spiritual healing,<sup>5</sup> and occasionally their ability to perform miracles.<sup>6</sup> The guru's charismatic authority is often blended with traditional authority,<sup>7</sup> for example, with appeals to Hinduism's ancient Vedic texts and the traditional varnāśrama dharma system of duty based upon one's stage in life and inherited social status.<sup>8</sup> Synthesizing various guru studies in *Gurus in America*, Daniel Gold describes charismatic and traditional forms of authority working for two types of gurus: 1) those revered as teachers, and 2) those considered embodiments of the divine. He concludes, "For the respected human teacher, it is primarily the guru's culture that mediates the divine, but for the divine embodiment, it is sooner the guru's person itself that does so."<sup>9</sup> However, in addition to this charismatic and traditional authority, contemporary gurus create another form of institutional authority, which develops out of the long history of gurus in Hinduism.

In the ancient Sanskrit sources, the guru is a wise figure, archetypically a brahmin man, who could impart a student disciple, or śiṣya, with knowledge of the *Vedas*. The *Upaniṣads*

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<sup>5</sup> See for example Jacob Copeman, *Veins of Devotion: Blood Donation and Religious Experience in North India* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009); Veena Das, "The dreamed guru: The entangled lives of the amil and the anthropologist," in *The Guru in South Asia: New Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Jacob Copeman and Aya Ikegame (London: Routledge, 2014), 133—155; Mark Singleton and Tara Fraser, "T. Krishnamacharya, Father of Modern Yoga," in *Gurus of Modern Yoga*, ed. Mark Singleton and Ellen Goldberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 83—106.

<sup>6</sup> See for example studies of Sathya Sai Baba: Smriti Srinivas, *In the Presence of Sai Baba: Body, City, and Memory in a Global Religious Movement* (Boston: Brill, 2008); Tulasi Srinivas, *Winged Faith: Rethinking Globalization and Religious Pluralism through the Satya Sai Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010)

<sup>7</sup> Here, I'm drawing of Max Weber's three-part typology of legitimate authority: legal, traditional, and charismatic. In his *Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, Weber lays out "three pure types of legitimate authority": 1) rational-legal authority, based on the right of patterned, normative rules; 2) traditional authority, based on reverence for inherited traditions; and 3) charismatic authority, based on devotion to an exceptional, sacred leader. Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), 328—363.

<sup>8</sup> For example, John Little, "Video Vacana: Swadhyaya and Sacred Tapes," in *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia*, ed. Lawrence A Babb and Susan S. Wadley (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 254—283; Tamal Krishna Goswami and Ravi M. Gupta, "Krishna and Culture: What Happens When the Lord of Vrindavana Moves to New York City," in *Gurus in America*, ed. Thomas Forsthoefel and Cynthia Ann Humes (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 81—96.

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Gold, "Epilogue: Elevated Gurus, Concrete Traditions, and the Problem of Western Devotees," in *Gurus in America*, ed. Forsthoefel and Humes, 221.

particularly emphasized the necessity of a guru to understand this sacred knowledge, as self-study of the scriptures was considered fruitless. Gurus gave personal instruction to selected, upper-caste disciples to memorize the text of the *Vedas* and gain an intellectual understanding of their philosophy. However, the śiṣya also learned from the guru's daily life, and one of their primary tasks was to stay near the guru. The term "upaniṣad" itself translates as "sitting down near someone," hinting at its method of transmission. The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* explains the śiṣya should first approach a guru with an offering of firewood to show his readiness to attend the guru's domestic homa fire sacrifice and maintain it for years to come.<sup>10</sup> By living with the guru for years, the śiṣya became akin to a member of his family. For example, *The Laws of Manu* describe the guru as a parent of the disciple,<sup>11</sup> and the *Atharva Veda* states that the guru brings the student to a second birth when he initiates him as a disciple in the Upanāyana ceremony.<sup>12</sup> During his studies, the disciple was to honor the guru with a reverence approaching that for God, serve him dutifully by maintaining his household and obeying his every command, and internalize his teaching by listening to and contemplating his every word. Thus, in the ancient period, the guru-śiṣya relationship was a long-term, inter-personal commitment for disciples to live with, serve, and learn from a guru.

In the medieval bhakti period, the reverence and dutiful service to ancient brahmin gurus gave way to personal worship and deification of gurus leading entire sampradāys, movements or 'cults.' Disciples no longer followed gurus because their brahmin lineage, ritual expertise, or memorization of Vedic texts, but for their charisma and ability to connect one with the divine. Personal worship and devotional songs took the place of Vedic rituals, like the homa fire, and the

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<sup>10</sup> *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, IV, 10, 1, cited in Joel Mlecko, "The Guru in Hindu Tradition," *Numen* 29, no. 1 (1982): 33—61.

<sup>11</sup> *The Laws of Manu*, II, 171, cited in Mlecko, "The Guru," 39.

<sup>12</sup> *Atharva Veda*, XI, 5, 3, cited in Mlecko, "The Guru," 37.

philosophical contemplation of the *Upaniṣads*. Bhakti poets like Kabir venerated the guru as the only one who could ferry souls across the troubled waters of life to reach God and escape the endless cycles of rebirth. Bhakti also opened discipleship to wider followings, no longer restricted by caste status, gender, or education. Fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Vaiṣṇava ācāryas like Vallabha and Chaitanya founded sampradāys that placed entire communities in a shared devotional relation to one ācārya or guru. These bhakti communities often connected or equated gurus with the deities they worshiped; for example, both Vallabha and Chaitanya were also praised as manifestations of Kṛṣṇa. As Joel Mlecko has noted, “devotion to and worship of the guru was and is similar to that of a deity worshiped in a temple. Devotees burn incense before the guru, prostrate before him, present him offerings, drink water in which his feet have been washed, and take betel chewed by the guru as *prasādam* [sanctified food].”<sup>13</sup> Hence, bhakti goes far beyond the the brahmin tradition of obligation and reverence to a guru to fully deifying and focusing worship on the guru.

The modern period has witnessed a continuation of bhakti worship and communities, while their gurus have scaled up from individuals into institutions. This transformation was powered by the mass mobilization of devotees for sevā missions in social welfare programs. In the colonial period, gurus began undertaking social welfare programs in conversation with internal and external critiques from the early nationalist movement and Christian missionaries in India. Guru-led movements began redirecting devotee sevā from the guru personally to general society by opening schools, healthcare centers, distributing food and water to the poor, caring for the elderly, and working with tribal, Adivasi populations.<sup>14</sup> These sevā-focused organizations were also successful

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<sup>13</sup> Mlecko, “The Guru,” 48—52.

<sup>14</sup> Deepa S. Reddy, “Hindutva as Praxis,” *Religion Compass* 5/8 (2011): 412—426.

in expanding outside of India, beginning Swami Vivekananda's Ramakrishna Mission at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>15</sup> By the late twentieth century, most gurus with global followings also ran international humanitarian organizations. In the transnational context, most devotees rarely have personal contact with the guru, and service within the guru's institution becomes their means of connecting. Amanda Lucia has analyzed this equation between guru and institution in her work with the guru Amma's organization, the Mata Amritanandamayi (or MA) Mission. She argues, "to provide services for the upkeep, promotion, or expansion of the MA Mission worldwide *is the same as* service directed toward the guru herself, only the scaling is expanded to situate one's local efforts onto the multidimensional layers of a massive global institution [emphasis original]."<sup>16</sup> When transnational gurus identify themselves with their institutions, devotees feel that every sevā assignment—from direct humanitarian aid to bureaucratic paperwork—is a means to serve and worship the guru personally.

The guru's bureaucratic authority is not merely a routinization of prior charismatic authority but a distinctive form of "expansive agency" exercised through an institution.<sup>17</sup> Maya Warrier has explained that devotees often point to the guru's capacity for institution building as a miracle itself and evidence of their divinity.<sup>18</sup> Within BAPS, anthropologist Hanna Kim has noted that Pramukh Swami was more renowned for his administrative prowess than for his charisma or public speaking ability. At the inauguration of BAPS' monumental Akshardham temple in New

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<sup>15</sup> Gwilym Beckerlegge, *Swami Vivekananda's Legacy of Service: A Study of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>16</sup> Amanda J. Lucia, "'Give Me Sevā Overtime': Selfless Service and Humanitarianism in Mata Amritanandamayi's Transnational Guru Movement," *History of Religions* 54, no. 2 (2014): 191—192. In this quotation, Lucia is reflecting on Maya Warrier's analysis of sevā in the MA Mission: Warrier, *Hindu Selves*, 2005.

<sup>17</sup> Copeman and Ikegame have drawn from the literature on South Asian lordly leadership to characterize the guru's institutional power as an "expansive agency." Copeman and Ikegame, *The Guru in South Asia*, 13.

<sup>18</sup> Maya Warrier, "The Seva Ethic and the Spirit of Institution Building in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission," in *Hinduism in Public and Private: Reform, Hindutva, Gender, and Sampraday*, ed. Antony Copley (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 254—289.

Delhi, Kim described Pramukh Swami’s speech as “typically simple and direct.”<sup>19</sup> Instead of enthusiastic preaching, Pramukh Swami attracted followers with an impressive organization capable of conducting mass events and constructing iconic temples. His simple speech made the guru seem unassuming and relatable, but the glittering achievements of his institution created their own kind of bureaucratic charisma. Pramukh Swami realized a superhuman efficacy through the workers of BAPS that gave him and his organization an air of divine inspiration. Notoriously uncontrollable, gurus expand themselves through their institutions to undertake ventures on a global scale: iconic constructions, humanitarian relief, and mass education. The transnational institution becomes the corporation, the collective body, of the divine guru entity.

Building on this scholarship of institutional guruhood, I explore the particular role of a devotional media institution in the production and perception of a transnational guru’s spiritual authority. Institutional media *sevā* trains devotees—both those performing the *sevā* and those consuming the media—to perceive the guru’s divinity. In addition to the way all institutional *sevā* connects devotees to the guru, media *sevā* in BAPS attunes the human senses to those aspects of the guru that index his embodiment of divinity: his folded hands, his gentle demeanor, his robes, his words, manner of speaking, his elegant ritual performance, the tilak and cāndlo markings on his body. Scholars of Hinduism often describe the devotees’ relationship with the guru as mimetic; they aspire to copy his example and approach his ideal of religious observance.<sup>20</sup> With the mimetic process, devotees watch the guru in order to memorize his conduct and emulate it in their own lives. However, before this guru mimesis is possible, I suggest, devotees must first cultivate the devotional sensorium that enables their very consciousness of his guru-ness. They must learn how

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<sup>19</sup> Hanna Kim, “Transnational Movements: Portable Religion and the Case Study of the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha,” *Hinduism in the Modern World*, ed. Brian Hatcher (New York: Routledge, 2016), 55.

<sup>20</sup> On guru mimesis in BAPS, see Hanna Kim, “Svāminārāyaṇa: *Bhaktiyoga* and the *Akṣarbrahman* Guru,” in *Gurus of Modern Yoga*, ed. Singleton and Goldberg, 237—260.

to look at, listen to, feel, and focus on the guru. This is the primary perceptual training that media sevā conducts. When it is systematically integrated into an organization like BAPS, institutional media sevā enables the mass, transnational attachment of devotees to a divine guru they may never see in person.

### *Sevā and/as Mediation*

Sevā mediates the guru, and in this section, I argue that media sevā manifests the guru in two senses, first, in augmenting his divine “expansive agency” through his institution and, second, in the sense of cultivating the mass perception of his guru-ness through images, films, press, books, tweets, songs, exams, and more. BAPS’ mediation projects are mostly undertaken by devotees who give their labor as sevā either freely or as salaried staff.<sup>21</sup> In transnational Hindu organizations, devotees encounter the guru’s presence through their personal sevā and the sevā of others. The guru’s dependence on media sevā was cast into relief during the Covid-19 pandemic. Mahant Swami self-isolated with a small group of sādhus in the village of Nenpur, Gujarat, just outside of Ahmedabad for over fifteen months (at present). Virtually no devotees saw the guru in person, and he manifested in devotees’ lives solely through the workers who recorded, edited, broadcast, and shared his media. As Jeremy Stolow argued in his essay “Religion and/as Media,” scholars should move beyond an instrumental understanding of media neatly transmitting religious teachings to their intended audience.<sup>22</sup> Rather, Stolow suggests, the sacred is only enacted through myriad media—language, writing, ritual gesture, music, incense, art, architecture, and more—such that we can understand religion itself is a form of mediation. Moreover, every new medium manifests the sacred differently, and as media change so does the sacred. I suggest that the sacred figure of

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<sup>21</sup> There are also many BAPS laborers and staffers, especially at the lower levels and in manual labor, who are not devotees and do not consider their work to be sevā. However, these non-devotee workers always have BAPS members as colleagues or supervisors, and they are ultimately directed by the BAPS sādhu hierarchy.

<sup>22</sup> Jeremy Stolow, “Religion and/as Media,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 22, no. 4 (2005): 119—145.

the guru is one such case and that every new media sevā performed in his institution alters his spiritual presence and powers.

Focusing on the work of mediation, I emphasize popular devotional participation in manifesting the guru. To complement ethnographies studying the reception and consumption of religious media,<sup>23</sup> I explore the process of producing such religious mediation as a devotional undertaking in itself. BAPS devotees do not simply receive its media products. They also become the channels of that mediation, embodying the guru's message for others to see, teaching and learning the guru hagiographies over generations, and technologizing his spiritual mission for the modern world. Devotees see high spiritual stakes in the work of media sevā. For example, when the guru decides to use a particular medium, sevaks believe it to be God's will, and their media sevā becomes a means of serving a divine plan and accruing spiritual benefit for their souls.

In some ways, this understanding of mediating the sacred stands in contrast to how BAPS devotees and theologians would describe the guru's media and the guru himself. The first guru of BAPS, Shastriji Maharaj, established the group's theology of "Akṣar Puruṣottam" (the AP of BAPS), which elevates and solidifies the role of a guru (Akṣar) as the necessary link between all humans and the supreme God, Svāminārāyaṇ (Puruṣottam). BAPS followers understand the guru as the medium of the sacred; for them, Svāminārāyaṇ sees the world through his eyes and hears through his ears. Importantly, the guru is a perfect and unchanging medium that purely transmits God to the human realm. Sadhu Paramtattvadas analogizes the guru as a cup that holds the water of divinity and allows others to partake of it. He goes on to describe the guru as a "perfectly

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<sup>23</sup> For example: Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Matthew Engelke, *A Problem of Presence: Beyond Scripture in an African Church* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Emilio Spadola, *The Calls of Islam: Sufis, Islamists, and Mass Mediation in Urban Morocco* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

transparent cup. It not only holds the water but also reveals what it is holding.”<sup>24</sup> Here Paramtattvadas conveys the BAPS teaching that the guru is Akṣarbrahman, a non-human divine entity eternally free from the corruption of māyā, the material universe, and thus the ideal vessel for Svāminārāyaṇ’s presence. This Akṣar Puruṣottam theology would reject the understanding that new media change the sacred or that the medium of the guru changes at all.

However, BAPS’ devotional discourse, particularly around pleasing the guru, also informs my understanding of sevā expanding the guru’s agency and attuning devotees to his divinity. In BAPS, sevā is definitionally linked to the guru as an action undertaken with the intention to please him. The gurunā rājīpo, or that which pleases the guru, is a spiritual motivation that pushes millions of Svāminārāyaṇ devotees to volunteer their time, labor, and wealth each year. Whenever their guru mentions that he *likes* this or that, BAPS devotees pay special attention and remember his words. Those who later recreate, or merely recall, the gurunā rājīpo will demonstrate depth and endurance in their guru-devotion. Publicly announced pleasures are capillaries of the guru’s soft power that can influence millions of devotees, for example: to learn the Gujarati language, to study canonical Svāminārāyaṇ and Hindu texts, to observe strict vegetarian dietary restrictions, to embody Gujarati gendered and devotional norms, to support their fellow community members. Many Svāminārāyaṇ devotees readily acknowledge that they would not have engaged in charity work, theological and linguistic studies, devotional rituals, or musical training, without the guru’s influence. Mediating the gurunā rājīpo is one way the BAPS guru exercises an “expansive agency” through his institution.

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<sup>24</sup> Sadhu Paramtattvadas, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 44.

The gurunā rājīpo also attunes devotees to the guru’s ever-present divine surveillance that monitors their everyday behavior. There is widespread, low-level anxiety among devotees who want to please their guru and often feel uncertain of the best way to do so. In many interviews, BAPS devotees have told me they constantly ask themselves the question: “Bāpā rājī taśe?” “Will this please Bāpā [the guru]?” as a mental habit of vigilant self-assessment. For example, early in my fieldwork, one female devotee, and full-time BAPS sevak, explained that she considered participation in my ethnography as a way to please the guru. As she answered my questions, she continuously self-reflected: “Will this please Bāpā?” In the moment she first explained this to me, I laughed, a little uncomfortably. Still, she made sure I understood she was not joking: “No, seriously. From the morning, when I wake up, everything I do, while I’m in the kitchen cooking, the thought comes, “Will Swami be happy with this?” “Is this OK?” [...] It’s automatic.” An internalized and reflexive attention to the gurunā rājīpo transforms all daily activities into devotional tests under the guru’s watchful eye. Kitchen work, ACT prep, office memos—BAPS devotees have mentioned these and other mundane, worldly tasks as devotional assessments and opportunities to please their guru.

Sevā thus becomes a devotional balm that eases anxieties around pleasing the guru. If devotees are active in sevā, they can rest assured that God and guru will tend to their soul. Svāminārāyaṇ soteriology teaches that sevā leads one toward receiving Svāminārāyaṇ’s grace and attaining mokṣa, ultimate spiritual liberation in this life or after death.<sup>25</sup> In the *Vacanāmṛt*, Sahajānand Svāmī often emphasizes the importance of sevā for liberation, for example saying, “Those who are eager to secure liberation should thus serve such a Sant [a true guru].”<sup>26</sup> In my

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<sup>25</sup> Paramtattvadas, *Swaminarayan Theology*, especially 291—297.

<sup>26</sup> *The Vachanāmṛt: Spiritual Discourses of Bhagwān Svāminārāyaṇ*, Gadhada 3.26, trans. BAPS Sadhus (Ahmedabad: Swaminarayan Aksharpath, 2014), cited in Paramtattvadas, *Swaminarayan Theology*, 293.

conversations with BAPS devotees about their lives in the organization, *sevā* inevitably arose as a central part of their devotional practice. BAPS devotees take *sevā* as an opportunity to cultivate the virtues of mental and physical discipline, detachment from worldly pleasures, selflessness, and unity with their fellow devotees. For BAPS devotees, any activity can become *sevā* if it is undertaken with devotion to the guru or the intention of pleasing God.<sup>27</sup> BAPS temples assign devotees to *sevā* to cover every facet of temple operation: cleaning floors, landscaping, decorating, temple security, cooking meals, giving tours, reading announcements, stage management, conducting meetings, teaching classes, taking attendance, data entry, and many more. By diligently performing their assigned tasks, BAPS devotees have confidence that their *sevā* pleases the guru.

Every change in *sevā* changes the guru's manifestation. For a transnational organization that identifies the guru with his institution, *sevā* assignments actualize the guru's expansive agency and shape his corporate body. Especially relevant for this study, Pramukh Swami institutionalized forms of *sevā* in 1980 by founding various *sevā* departments within BAPS. The *sevā* departments were initially established to support BAPS' administration of mass festivals, beginning with its celebration of the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Sahajānand's birth in 1981; however, the departments have remained a central structure of the institution ever since. The original departments included: Parking, Crowd Control, Tour Guides, Women's Activities, Food and Catering, Grounds Sanitation, Video, Photography, Press, and Public Relations. *Sevā* departments also have several hierarchical tiers of management: *kāryakar* (worker), *nirīkṣak* (inspector), *nirdeśak* (director), *sancālak* (administrator), and *maṇḍal sancālak* (group administrator). With discrete assignments and rankings inside a vast *sevā* bureaucracy, *sevaks* come to experience the guru as a chief

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<sup>27</sup> Sadhu Mangalnidhidas, 2017, "Service as Spiritual Endeavor in the BAPS Swaminarayan Tradition," in *Engaged Hinduism: World Engagement and Service in Hindu Thought and Practice*, ed. Rita D. Sharma and Arvind Sharma (London: Palgrave Macmillan Press, 2017).

executive, running the operation far above them. The organizational structure also connotes a systematicity to the guru's vision as a comprehensive planner who anticipates every need. These departments institutionalized the work of media sevā—in the Photography, Video, Press, and PR departments—adapting traditional Svāminārāyaṇ sources on training the human senses.

Since the life of Sahajānand Svāmī, the Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy has sought to cultivate a devotional sensorium in its followers. Talal Asad and Charles Hirschkind have argued that religious media attune the bodily senses to perceive divinity and construct a normative model of the human sensorium as a proper religious subjectivity.<sup>28</sup> Sahajānand Svāmī was no exception when he taught that true bhakti for God was predicated on the cultivation of vairāgya (detachment) from all worldly pursuits and desires. He taught that the pleasure of experiencing God (Bhagvān) in his divine abode (dhām) is infinitely superior to worldly pleasures: “compared to the bliss of the *dhām* of *Bhagvān*, the pleasures of worldly [senses] are like feces. Only worms that live in the feces feel that there is profound bliss – a human would realize feces to be nothing but utter misery.”<sup>29</sup> Sahajānand also taught that proper theological understanding disables a person from indulging their human senses: “They [the senses] become blunt only by the complete understanding of *brahm* and *Parabrahm*. For example, if a person, whose teeth have become very sensitive as a result of sucking lemons, has to chew some chick-peas, he would never be able to chew them.”<sup>30</sup> In the same way that sucking on lemons makes chickpeas intolerable to chew, a full understanding of Sahajānand's teaching erases the pleasure of earthly indulgences like food, drink, and sex. The cultivation of vairāgya pushed devotees to stave off their bodily desires and detach

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<sup>28</sup> Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), especially 72—79. Hirschkind, *Ethical Soundscape*, especially 13—18, and 74—84.

<sup>29</sup> Shree Svāminārāyan Mandir, Bhuj, *Vachanāmrutam*, Vadtāl 19 (Bhuj: Shree Nar-Nārāyandev Printing Press, 2013), 659.

<sup>30</sup> BAPS Sadhus, *Vachanāmrut*, Gadhadā 1, 204.

from the sensual pleasures of this world. In their stead, Sahajānand preached of single-minded devotion for God and constant absorption in his image.

The work of contemporary sectarian Svāminārāyaṇ mediators is to cultivate a single-minded devotional sensorium, in which the guru is the aesthetic focus and center of devotee pleasure. Alongside the founder's ethic of vairāgya, contemporary Svāminārāyaṇ events can appear remarkably opulent. Sahajānand himself was not opposed to grandiosity; for example, in late 1809, he famously conducted a mass vegetarian yajña, sacrifice ritual, in the town of Jetalpur, outside of Ahmedabad, that attracted over one hundred thousand attendees. Today, Svāminārāyaṇ temple halls and event stages are covered in lush technicolor decorations, and gurus are presented to massive crowds of devotees with extravagant pomp. Cynthia Packert has analyzed such over-the-top aesthetics in BAPS as a "bhakti visuality," or a visual expression of the devotee's proper relation to God and guru.<sup>31</sup> BAPS represents the ideal of effusive, single-pointed devotion to Svāminārāyaṇ by lavishing ornamentation upon sacred images and the sacred figure of the guru. Devotees cover the guru with sumptuous flower garlands, seat him on ornate thrones, don elaborate costumes to perform skits and dances before him, and generally surround his planned public appearances with decorations. In this way, BAPS teaches that a proper experience of spiritual pleasure is anchored on the guru.

Chapter Three considers how publicizing the guru is a spiritually satisfying form of sevā for BAPS devotees. I argue that publicity sevā transfers the BAPS bhakti visuality to the guru's representation in the Gujarati press. Engendering positive press coverage of the guru's VIP meetings, temple openings, and festivals is a way for these sevaks to worship the guru. They seek

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<sup>31</sup> Cynthia Packert, "From Gujarat to the Globe: 'Bhakti Visuality' and Identity in BAPS Svāminārāyaṇ Hinduism," *The Journal of Hindu Studies* 12 (2019): 192—223.

to have the guru properly praised and esteemed for the great works he affects and the massive following he gathers. The press strategy requires persistent, long-term networking with media representatives to foster collegial working relationships for BAPS. Guided by their sevā departments, sevaks notify press outlets of major BAPS events, solicit positive quotes from VIP guests, and invite media workers to receive the guru's personal blessing. The Press and Public Relations sevā departments train these devotees on working with reporters, cameramen, editors, and VIP guests to represent BAPS and embody the guru's message. Devotees report this training gives them more confidence in public speaking and a more optimistic outlook on life. Press and PR sevaks feel they have a positive, peaceful message to share with any audience. BAPS devotees and sympathizers look to the guru's glowing representation in the press as further evidence of his divinity, now corroborated by outside observers. In fact, the guru's press coverage is directly influenced by Press and PR sevaks recreating their devotional aesthetic with effusive praise for God's perfect, transparent vessel.

The press' recreation of their bhakti visibility generates public spiritual authority for BAPS as an influential institution and its guru as a recognized holy figure. The greater the number of his press mediations, the more the guru shapes popular perception of the Svāminārāyaṇ movement, centered on himself, BAPS' sectarian guru lineage, and its Akṣar Puruṣottam theology. His publicity makes the guru into the spokesman of the Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy within India, and a representative of Hinduism generally in the UK and US. BAPS as an institution also benefits from this publicity, which draws larger crowds to their events, enhances their credibility as an international humanitarian organization, and produces political capital for their iconic temple-construction projects. Bhakti's emphasis on a direct personal connection to the divine has long made it an arena of popular empowerment and resistance to caste and colonial hegemony.

However, as Kajri Jain argues, in every age, “these oppositional currents have also been subject to reterritorialization within new formations of power, harnessing them to institutional spaces and social hierarchy.”<sup>32</sup> Typifying what Jain calls “neoliberal devotion,” BAPS harnesses devotional passions to capitalize on its representations of Hindu identity on both a local and global scale.<sup>33</sup> Particularly in a time of Hindu nationalism, the BAPS institutional guru now wields influence in Gujarati politics and Indian international relations.

Chapter Five argues that media sevā in digital technology hinges on the ascetic ethic of vairāgya, detachment from this-worldly pleasures. Most of BAPS’ new tech products begin with a small group of devotee workers called the Multimedia Cell (or MMC), who experiment with the latest technology in order to please the guru. Their sevā assignment is an open-ended reconnaissance into any technology that could be potentially useful for the guru. MMC workers thus see themselves as high-tech professionals with a responsibility to keep abreast of the latest industry trends. However, the devotional discipline of their sevā is to maintain ascetic dispassion to resist the temptations of digital technology. MMC sevaks depend upon the guru’s restraint to preserve their spiritual detachment while being immersed in the alluring tech industry. Their projects are often redirected, truncated, or halted altogether by the guru, who does not always give the guidance they hope for. Sevaks nevertheless report this is a crucial correction when they become enamored of a certain technology and need to refocus on the guru’s spiritual mission. They

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<sup>32</sup> Kajri Jain, “Divine Mass Reproduction,” in *Medium Religion: Faith, Geopolitics, Art.*, ed. Boris Groys and Peter Weibel (Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2011), 153. Jain has argued elsewhere that bhakti and business have deep historical connections, particularly around the gifting of sacred images to establish social-economic credit and annually lubricate commercial networks. Thus, guru publicity is just a recent instantiation in the long historical imbrication of devotional expression and business relationships in South Asia: Kajri Jain, “Gods in the Time of Automobility,” *Current Anthropology* (special edition on *New Media, New Publics?*) 58, Supplement 15 (2017): S17.

<sup>33</sup> Jain, “Divine Mass Reproduction,” 153—154.

strive to see new technology, in Sahajānand’s analogies, like feces or like chickpeas after sucking on lemons, illusory sensory pleasures that pale in comparison to the guru’s divine bliss.

In contrast to other studies of Hinduism and technology, I suggest the MMC’s open technological experimentation shores up the guru’s monopoly on theological judgments within BAPS. The MMC workers’ deference to the guru reifies his institutional authority to assign theological value to new technological power. These findings differ somewhat from the recent work on Hindu mediation by Tulasi Srinivas. Her work with priests in Bangalore revealed theological flexibility in the “experimental Hinduism” that she and Antoinette DeNapoli have theorized.<sup>34</sup> In *The Cow in the Elevator*, Srinivas follows the rapid changes in ritual practices around technology, for example, when a temple alters its policy from banning photography to allowing devotees to take pictures of their sacred images with smartphones.<sup>35</sup> Srinivas notices that two priests give two different theological explanations for the change. When she asks one priest about this disparity, he shrugs it off, responding, “You can say either and both will be correct.”<sup>36</sup> The priest’s easy accommodation characterizes a broader mentality of creative Hindu ethics based on *achara*, as adaptive practice, rather than *dharma*, as prescriptive duty.<sup>37</sup> However, such an ambivalence among religious authorities would not be tenable within BAPS; there must be a single, authoritative explanation. Put simply, the MMC’s experimental *sevā* does not engender theological flexibility in BAPS because it is siloed off within the institutional hierarchy and subservient to the guru’s executive discretion.

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<sup>34</sup> Antoinette DeNapoli, “‘Dharm is technology’: the theologizing of technology in the experimental Hinduism of renouncers in contemporary North India,” *International Journal of Dharma Studies* 5, no. 1 (December 2017): 1—36; Antoinette DeNapoli and Tulasi Srinivas, “The Moralizing of Dharma in Everyday Hinduisms,” *Nidān: International Journal for the Study of Indian Religions* 28, no. 2 (December 2016): 1—13.

<sup>35</sup> Tulasi Srinivas, *The Cow in the Elevator: An Anthropology of Wonder* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

<sup>36</sup> Srinivas, *Cow in the Elevator*, 169.

<sup>37</sup> Srinivas, *Cow in the Elevator*, 30.

Instead, this institutionalized technology sevā creates a perception of the guru's ability to predict the future by coupling cutting-edge technology with his conservative spiritual vision. The institutional guru firmly asserts that he teaches an unchanging traditional form of Hinduism, a message reinforced by his media's ascetic aesthetics. As the focal point of BAPS websites and smartphone apps, the guru's daily life is shown to be humble, rigorous, ritualistic, and, of course, filled with praise from devotees. The media presents him as a paragon of detachment; he is shown to discuss sacred text, perform ritual worship, counsel devotees, and little else. Devotees learn to perceive the guru living in spartan austerity and embodying perfect devotion. This guru is completely disinterested in new tech products yet also credited for the diligent labor that creates them. Atop the hierarchy of BAPS mediation, the guru is praised as the "inspirer" of all the MMC's media products, and devotees marvel at his ability to create so much so quickly. In this way, the MMC functions as another arm of the guru's expansive agency oriented toward the future of technology and his following. Devotees express wonder at the guru's divine foresight and comment that Mahant Swami's teaching, and Pramukh Swami's before it, anticipated the hazards of modern life with technology. The elderly ascetic leader thus becomes a tech visionary whose utter removal from technological life allows him to remain a step ahead of the industry and see the future over its constant churn of updates.

### *Centering Transnational Hinduism*

Mass mediation in an organization like BAPS is a pertinent example of how transnational Hinduism reflects back and changes Hinduism in India. Another contribution of this dissertation is to build upon studies of the Hindu diaspora as they relate to transnational Hinduism. Steven Vertovec opened his comparative study, *The Hindu Diaspora*, by arguing for an end of the perception that real Hinduism is located in India and diasporic Hindu practice is an imperfect

derivation thereof.<sup>38</sup> I take this argument a step further by reversing the directionality of Hindu change from the diaspora back to India. Joanne Waghorne's *Diaspora of the Gods* has made an argument along similar lines by demonstrating global and instantaneous connectivity among Hindu temples in urban centers.<sup>39</sup> Building upon this work, I show how the BAPS network extends the guru's mediations even to the villages of Gujarat and East Africa. I argue that the rise of transnational Hindu institutions creates a dialectic relationship between Indian and diasporic Hinduisms by which each constitutes the other.

To clarify terms, I must first differentiate between the "Hindu diaspora," "diasporic Hinduism," and "transnational Hinduism." When I speak of the "Hindu diaspora," I am referring to the demographic spread of Hindus and their descendants outside of South Asia. The most recent drivers of diasporic growth, relevant for this study, are: 1) the colonial British circulation of labor around the commonwealth, 2) post-colonial African nationalism, 3) American immigration reform, and 4) expanded worker visas under globalization. In my usage, "diasporic Hinduism" is simply Hinduism as it is practiced within the populations of the Hindu diaspora. Diasporic Hinduism thus has as many different forms as it has communities from Guyana, to New Jersey, to Nairobi, and so on. When I speak of "transnational Hinduism," I am referring to Hindu organizations that exist across national boundaries. These organizations maintain a greater degree of unity and uniformity in Hindu communities than diasporic Hinduism. Transnational Hindus share norms of practice, belief, and identity either through institutional affiliation (i.e., ISKCON, Ramakrishna Mission, Chinmaya Mission) or loyalty to a singular deity, guru, or lineage (i.e., the Sathya Sai Organization, the MA Mission, the Swadhyaya Parivar). In this understanding, a

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<sup>38</sup> Steven Vertovec, *The Hindu Diaspora: Comparative Patterns* (London: Routledge, 2000), 1—2.

<sup>39</sup> Joanne Punzo Waghorne, *Diaspora of the Gods: Modern Hindu Temples in an Urban Middle-Class World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

transnational Hindu organization encompasses either multiple diasporic communities, an Indian and diasporic community, or, most often, both.

Several mass media covered in this dissertation were initially created for diasporic communities but later returned to impact Indian Hindu communities. One recent example is the development of online darśan (sacred sight) of the guru's daily life on the BAPS website. In 1998, the MMC created a vicaraṇ (literally “wandering”) section on their website to display the guru's most recent travels, activities, and meetings. At that time, the MMC understood their vicaraṇ audience as the American and British diasporas, whose distance from Gujarat precluded regular, in-person darśan of the guru.<sup>40</sup> True to expectation, the vast majority of their web traffic came from the US and UK for over a decade. However, around 2012, the vicaraṇ section saw a sharp increase of Indian visitors taking online guru darśan. Smartphones and cellular data became widely affordable in India in the 2010s, and by 2020, roughly two-thirds of BAPS's web traffic came from Indian users. Online darśan and other media projects were designed to foster transnational connectivity to the guru, but transnationalism is a state that impacts devotional life both in the diaspora and in India. As a unified transnational organization, BAPS standardizes its diasporic innovations for all members, which regularizes a new mass-mediated connection to the guru in India. This understanding of transnationality can decenter India as the sole source of Hinduism and reveal the diaspora as a creative center of influence.

Chapter Two studies BAPS' first endeavor in diasporic organizing with the 1956 launch of its weekly printed newsletter, the *Satsaṅg Patrikā*. I argue the newsletter gave the guru a new

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<sup>40</sup> On the website's virtual darśan, see: Deepali D. Kulkarni, “Digital Mūrtis, Virtual Darśan and a Hindu Religioscape,” *Nidān: International Journal for Indian Studies* 3, no. 2 (December 2018): 40—54. I have also written about the website's creation and content: Andrew Kunze, “Swaminarayan (BAPS) Identity Formation in Virtual Transnationalism,” in *Swaminarayan Hinduism: Tradition, Adaptation, Identity*, ed. Raymond B. Williams and Yogi Trivedi (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016), 402—417.

spiritual omnipresence around his network of devotees, which was crucial at a time when BAPS began expanding abroad. Studies of global guru movements often track how mass media fill the gaps opened up by a movement's growth when the busy guru becomes inaccessible to the majority of their devotees.<sup>41</sup> Here I suggest that mass mediation also plays a role in creating these gaps, not merely responding to them. BAPS' newsletter printed step-by-step instructions for devotees to conduct their own devotional assemblies without the guru or a sādhu present. Gujaratis in East Africa were by far the most enthusiastic users of the *Satsaṅg Patrikā*. The guru held up the East African response as the new model for how all BAPS communities should function. His use of the newsletter normalized the diaspora's mass-mediated guru relationship for the entire BAPS network and trained devotees to perceive his spiritual presence in the printed word. Devotees fostered a new relationship with the guru by receiving weekly updates on his health and travels and excerpts from his speeches. Leading devotees read these updates aloud and expounded on the guru's message for their respective communities during assembly. This newsletter created a "close distance" to the guru that enhanced his auratic power by making him seem intimately familiar and yet transcendently removed.<sup>42</sup> By substituting the guru's physical presence with his mediation in the newsletter, BAPS enabled the guru to be spiritually omnipresent in all communities of their transnational network.

The major expansion and organization of BAPS membership abroad eventually returned to reshape the Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy in India. As Chapter Two argues, BAPS' initial

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<sup>41</sup> See for example: Forsthoefel and Humes, ed., *Gurus in America*, especially chapters: Lola Williamson, "The Perfectibility of Perfection: Siddha Yoga as a Global Movement," 147—168; and Selva J. Raj, "Passage to America: Ammachi on American Soil," 123—146. Also see Singleton and Goldberg, ed., *Gurus of Modern Yoga*, especially the chapters: Joanne Punzo Waghorne, "Engineering an Artful Practice: On Jaggi Vasudev's Isha Yoga and Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's Art of Living," 283—307; and Maya Warrior, "Online *Bhakti* in a Modern Guru Organization," 308—323.

<sup>42</sup> William Mazzarella, *Shoveling Smoke: Advertising and Globalization in Contemporary India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 250—287.

identification as “Svāminārāyaṇ” was only possible in the diaspora. Its strength in numbers and publicity abroad afforded the group public recognition as Svāminārāyaṇ in the Indian press years later. In the early twentieth century, the original Svāminārāyaṇ gādīs sued BAPS to bar it from preaching in Svāminārāyaṇ temples or publicly identifying as Svāminārāyaṇ. The East African diaspora was BAPS’ first opportunity to expand, and the newsletter made its new community especially well organized. African devotee leaders followed the newsletter’s instructions for conducting assemblies, wrote weekly reports on their attendance and activities, and submitted their reports to the Mumbai temple, where BAPS kept a filing system for all of its devotee groups. Then in 1972, when Idi Amin ordered the expulsion of all South Asians from Uganda, tens of thousands of Gujarati families were displaced and relocated to the United Kingdom in a matter of months. With its weekly correspondences and fastidious recordkeeping, BAPS was keenly positioned to expand again in the new British diaspora. Pramukh Swami’s 1970s world tours and new English-language publications quickly made BAPS the representative of Svāminārāyaṇ Hinduism abroad. By the early-1980s, BAPS was able to host mass festivals in Gujarat, and newspapers began representing Pramukh Swami as the “leader of Swaminarayans.” The membership, finances, and publicity that BAPS gained abroad allowed it to rival traditional Gujarat authorities and become central to the Svāminārāyaṇ movement in India.

Chapter Four analyzes standardized testing as a form of mass mediation with a distinctive capacity to discipline the minds of its transnational audience. Diaspora has been described as a type of consciousness, for example, by James Clifford (1994), as an awareness of multiple locations, of shared routes and roots.<sup>43</sup> BAPS has conducted mass, standardized testing of devotees

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<sup>43</sup> James Clifford, “Diasporas,” *Cultural Anthropology* 9, no. 3 (1994): 302—338.

in a program called “Satsang Exams” since 1972. I suggest this standardized education shows how a Hindu organization inculcate a transnational consciousness in its youth. Standardized testing institutes a formal discipline to mass media consumption, whose reception is otherwise notoriously difficult to predict. Generally, transnational audiences may reject, ignore, nuance, accept, adapt, or reappropriate mass mediations; however, in this case, devotees are made to reproduce the Exam textbooks’ content through rote memorization. The Exams both reach a transnational audience and encourage devotees to understand themselves as such. Members in India and abroad receive the same standardized curriculum, ensuring a degree of uniformity in their common knowledge across multiple nations. Further, the Exam materials theologize the history of BAPS’ transnational growth as evidence of divinity in their gurus and organization.

The transnational conditions rooted in mass migration and mass mediation engender a cultural instability that heightens the importance of standardized Hindu education. Arjun Appadurai anticipated a transnational desire for cultural certainty, especially in the familial realm of child-rearing, in *Modernity at Large*. Discussing the complications of diasporic social reproduction, he notes, “this is a world in which both points of departure and points of arrival are in cultural flux, and thus the search for steady points of reference, as critical life choices are made, can be very difficult.”<sup>44</sup> For Appadurai, globalization has destabilized and deterritorialized group identity to such an extent that family generations are more often disjunct and alienated from one another. As diasporic BAPS parents seek to connect their children with Indian and Hindu cultures, they value the Satsang Exam system as a modern and objective vessel for traditional Hinduism. They appreciate its numeric scoring as a sign of its fairness and accuracy. BAPS staff and

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<sup>44</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 44.

volunteers, roughly 400 female devotees in Gujarat, conduct the Satsang Exams' grading. Their rigorous, consistent work assures generations of test-takers that an unchanging standard of Hindu knowledge is being upheld. Test-taking devotees, generally the younger and newer members of BAPS, receive an official score and peer ranking from the Exams, concretizing their common relation to a fixed cultural standard. A standardized Hindu education becomes a "steady point of reference" for families raising children in a transnational organization.

Satsang Exams' accumulated archive of devotee scores creates an institutionalized guru omniscience by annually collecting vast amounts of information on its transnational devotee base. Like other mass mediations, standardized tests augment the institutional guru's spiritual powers, in this case granting him an insight into every devotee's level of knowledge. The experience of passing through the examination process is a new mediation of the traditional belief that God and the guru are antaryāmī. The antaryāmī (indwelling driver) is the form of God that resides within all souls, monitors, and sometimes controls their actions. Student-devotees have a new lived experience of the antaryāmī guru as the all-knowing examiner when they attempt to answer questions in the time-controlled, competitive Exams. With a standardized curriculum, the guru knows what tens of thousands of annual test-takers will learn before they do. Then the guru gains access to the minds of these devotees through their test results. Whether or not he ever views one's particular testing records, the guru is in the panoptic position with the potential to see anyone's answer sheets. Devotees who submit exams thus place themselves under the guru's surveillance. Test-takers report feeling that the guru has personally assessed their knowledge and perceived their level of commitment to learning in the satsang. An overall effect of the transnational need for steady cultural reproduction is a standardized mass education under a single omniscient guru, whose superhuman mental abilities are enhanced with each additional examinee.

Transnational Hindu organizations have and will continue to reshape Indian Hinduism in a co-constitutive relationship with the diaspora. BAPS' standardized testing, weekly newsletter, and online darśan are just three forms of mass mediation created for the diaspora that are now also integral to Svāminārāyaṇ devotional life in India. In a similar study, Amanda Lucia has suggested that global guru organizations are the central engines of innovation and influence in the contemporary Hindu world. Lucia argues that the crowded field of gurus creates a need for innovative messages and methods as they compete to attract new followers.<sup>45</sup> To be sure, BAPS has competed with and distinguished itself against other Hindu gurus and especially other Svāminārāyaṇ groups in the course of its growth. In contrast to Lucia's study, though, my analysis is more concerned with the institutional dynamics internal to a transnational Hindu organization. The transnational BAPS pursues both expansion and consolidation, mass education and standardization, devotional passion and guru loyalty.

BAPS's development into a transnational organization has been a dialectical cycle, back and forth, creating and recreating its Indian and diasporic devotional communities. The group's diasporic expansion creates new needs for devotees to feel connected with the guru, prompting innovative media projects. Indian communities adopt these mass-mediated forms in a way that reshapes their guru and his place in the Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy. As these Indian devotees continue to emigrate, they spread a new understanding of BAPS' prominence and representation of traditional Hinduism. Diasporic devotees donate to both their national branches and the guru in India, further enriching and empowering the transnational organization. In the process, I suggest, transnationalism remakes both the entity of the guru and the devotee's relation to him. The guru

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<sup>45</sup> Amanda Lucia, "Innovative Gurus: Tradition and Change in Contemporary Hinduism," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 18, no. 2 (August 2014): 224.

becomes integrally dependent on the mass media institution built around him, and devotees connect by participating in that mass mediation by creating, consuming, or reproducing it.

*Conclusion: Hindu Trans-/Nationalism*

With the rapid changes of media technology, the BAPS guru's powers have been in constant flux since the 1950s. The *Satsang Patrikā* newsletter first made him omnipresent in the weekly devotional assemblies as they expanded abroad. Publicity tours enhanced his spiritual authority as a recognized holy figure in multiple publics: the leader of Svāminārāyaṅs in Gujarat and a representative of Hinduism abroad. The Satsang Exam standardized tests recreated his guru omniscience in the testing experience of mass devotee assessment and the institutional archive of their results. The Multimedia Cell's high-tech work materializes his divine foresight by showing him to predict the technological future while remaining utterly detached from it. In every endeavor, this mass-mediated guru is co-created by devotees—sometimes a handful, sometimes thousands, sometimes millions—who participate in his mass mediation as sevā. Devotees find this mass media sevā satisfying for a number of aims—to feel the guru's presence, earn his grace for mokṣa, become better devotees, refine their virtues, receive spiritual knowledge, or gain credentials in the organization. Their media sevā actualizes the guru's expansive agency and enlivens his institutional body.

What kind of Hinduism emerges from this evolving institutional guru? The conjunction of conservative guru authority with an institutional media apparatus makes BAPS distinctive among transnational Hindu organizations. BAPS maintains strict gender norms and ethnic Gujarati traditions while simultaneously engaging with the latest media technologies. Their openness to new technology does not engender a liberalization or universalized spirituality discourse that Amanda Lucia studies, nor the “de-ethnicized Hinduism” that Joanne Waghorne characterizes in

other innovative guru movements.<sup>46</sup> Gujarati language and customs are still deeply intertwined with Svāminārāyaṇ devotion in BAPS, and the organization prides itself on adhering to Vedic and Upaniṣadic traditions. Here, BAPS aligns with Lucia’s argument that “the majority of gurus also claim to be abiding by tradition, despite their innovations.”<sup>47</sup> BAPS is not alone in its embrace of traditional Hinduism, but its particular history with mass mediation is perhaps the best illustration of how transnational Hinduism engenders wide-spread support for Hindu nationalism.

BAPS’ institutional history can help us understand that transnational Hinduism, more than American diasporic Hinduism, fosters wide-spread sympathy for Indian Hindu nationalism. Prema Kurien’s *A Place at the Multicultural Table* argued that the American multiculturalist paradigm privileges Hindu nationalist voices by expecting cultural spokesmen to succinctly represent Hinduism to the public.<sup>48</sup> In Indian Hinduism, as Kurien notes, the idea of official leaders speaking for all of Hinduism is itself a deeply controversial and political contention. Further, those who aim to essentialize and rally around Hindu identity reinforce the Hindu nationalist politics currently deployed by the BJP, Bharatiya Janata Party. I agree with Kurien that BAPS has played a prominent role in establishing “official” Hinduism in the American diaspora. However, more significantly than American multiculturalism, I argue, it is the transnational condition of organizations like BAPS that gives rise to their codification of Hindu identity. BAPS may not be distinctly American, but it is distinctly transnational. Transnational instability and fracture created a demand for standardization and stabilization in Hindu education and community, first in East

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<sup>46</sup> Amanda Huffer (Lucia), “Backdoor Hinduism: A Recoding in the Language of Spirituality,” *Nidān: International Journal for the Study of Hinduism* 23 (2011): 53—71; Joanne Punzo Waghorne, “From Diaspora to (Global) Civil Society: Global Gurus and the Processes of De-ritualization and De-ethnization in Singapore,” in *Hindu Rituals at the Margins: Transformations, Innovations, Reconsiderations*, ed. Tracy Pintchman and Linda Penkower (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2014), 186—207.

<sup>47</sup> Amanda Lucia, “Innovative Gurus: Tradition and Change in Contemporary Hinduism,” *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 18, no. 2 (August 2014): 249.

<sup>48</sup> Prema Kurien, *A Place at the Multicultural Table: The Development of and American Hinduism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 6—8.

Africa, then in the UK, and the US. BAPS' resultant crystallizations of Hindu education, guru instructions, devotional publicity, and centralized authority all share elective affinities with Hindu nationalist politics in India.

Nationalism and transnationalism co-constitute one another through organizations like BAPS. The institutional formation of the transnational guru fosters a sociality that aligns with Hindu nationalist governmentality. BAPS' essentialized representations of its South Asian Hindu roots play into the nationalist imagination of an eternally Hindu India and the erasure of Islamic and other religious influences. The standardization of mass Hindu education reinforces an artificial singularity of pan-Hindu identity that is the basis of BJP voter mobilization.<sup>49</sup> BAPS' bureaucratic structure around grassroots sevā familiarizes members to the RSS, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's, mode of nationalist volunteering and activism. This transnational Hinduism organizes mass events around a mode of consensus-building that majoritarian nationalism also uses to drown out dissent and eliminate a culture of critique. Finally, the centralization of such enormous authority in a single guru figurehead prepares members for an enduring loyalty for a pious strongman like Narendra Modi. None of this is an inevitability of mass mediation per se. However, the organization of mass media sevā around an institutional guru often dovetails with the BJP's political interests. In many ways, BAPS' transnational organizing primes both its Indian and diasporic members to participate in the sevā, mediation, and governmentality of Hindu nationalism.

Chapter One contrasts this trans/nationalist codification of the Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy with the diverse historical sources that its founder, Sahajānand Svāmī, drew from to establish the

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<sup>49</sup> Nisha Mathew has recently made a similar argument about the role of the Svāminārāyaṇ diaspora in building support for Modi's BJP: Nisha Mathew, "Bhakti Nation: The return of the Hindu diaspora in Modi's India," *History and Anthropology* 32, no. 2 (June 2021), doi: 10.1080/02757206.2021.1946049.

original community. Quite apart from the pure, unchanging Hinduism represented at present, Sahajānand assembled a new devotional tradition from the fragments of many others: theistic Vedānta, North Indian asceticism, Vaiṣṇava bhakti, and Mughal-era Sufi Islam. Young Sahajānand travelled along popular North Indian pilgrimage routes and learned from his eighteenth-century bhakti milieu. As a Sampradāy leader, his charismatic powers quickly gathered a following, and he successfully negotiated with British interests in Gujarat to shore up the institutional foundations for his Sampradāy. His eclectic teaching allowed devotees to incorporate their previous devotional experiences and meanings from other traditions into the Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy. By surveying the literature on Sahajānand and the early Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy, the first chapter argues that fragments from multiple religious sources do not neatly assimilate into a systematic or uniform whole but rather invite a multiplicity of interpretations. By briefly considering the position of BAPS and its particular interpretation within the overall Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy, the chapter contextualizes the rest of the dissertation's exploration of its rise to prominence. Sahajānand formed his original movement in complex relation to its adjacent religious communities, and this plurality of influences enriches the Svāminārāyaṇ tradition that survives, even through its sectarian and nationalist mediations of today.

Chapter One: Sahajānand's Formation:  
South Asian Sources of the Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy

*Sahajānand's Mosaic Tradition*

How are new religious traditions formed? The Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy (movement) is a relatively young religious community, which despite, or perhaps because of its age, affiliates itself with far older Indian philosophical and devotional traditions. The Sampradāy was founded by Sahajānand Svāmī (d. 1830), who officially allied it with the medieval philosophical school of Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, and the Sampradāy has produced Sanskrit commentaries from the nineteenth to twenty-first centuries to bolster that alliance. However, Sahajānand's teaching does not fully conform to a Viśiṣṭādvaita worldview nor construct an altogether new system of thought. Moreover, the tradition's official affiliation with Viśiṣṭādvaita obscures a myriad of cultural and religious sources that also informed Sahajānand's teaching. Sahajānand drew piecemeal from sources around his South Asian religious milieu to assemble a unique bricolage of a tradition that attracted followers through novel combinations of preexistent religious texts, tropes, images, and norms.

Despite receiving consistent western academic attention since the 1980s, the Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy remains largely unincorporated within the wider field of South Asian religious studies. Until recently, the formation of the early Sampradāy has remained absent from the historiography of Hindu reform that characterizes other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century movements, like the Brahma Samaj and Arya Samaj.<sup>1</sup> Early scholarly accounts struggled to categorize the Svāminārāyaṇ tradition: not quite a medieval bhakti cult, nor a modern reform movement, not a

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Hatcher, "Situating the Swaminarayan Tradition in the Historiography of Modern Hindu Reform," in *Swaminarayan Hinduism: Tradition, Adaptation, Identity*, ed. Raymond B. Williams and Yogi Trivedi (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016), 9—10.

Brahmanical tradition, and nothing like t̄antra and śakti of Eastern India.<sup>2</sup> As a result, the Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy was often analyzed in isolation as an idiosyncratic Gujarati Vaiṣṇava community. However, more recent scholarship has begun to demonstrate the early Sampradāy's interaction and imbrication with other Hindu and Muslim traditions, not only in Gujarat but across north India.<sup>3</sup> Through a survey of this literature, this chapter reimagines the early Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy as co-constituted with other South Asian religions through conversation, rivalry, and accommodation.

To understand the Svāminārāyaṇ tradition's diversity of influences, I draw upon Anand Pandian's concept of tradition as "mosaic" that emphasizes the plurality and occasional incongruity of the multiple cultural sources that constitute traditions.<sup>4</sup> In a critical re-examination of Alister McIntyre's understanding of tradition as opposed to fragmentation,<sup>5</sup> Pandian turns to Walter Benjamin's idea that cultural fragments and disjointed historical survivals are still efficacious in assembling vibrant mosaics of tradition, like the remnants of pagan worship incorporated within European Christianity.<sup>6</sup> Pandian thus arrives at a vision of tradition not opposed to fragmentation but built upon it; "the mosaic suggests the possibility of a tradition existing in fragments, subsisting in fragments, and supporting the fashioning of new and meaningful cultural and moral forms even as the coherent horizons of their origin recede

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<sup>2</sup> Raymond Brady Williams, *A new face of Hinduism: the Swaminarayan religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Hanna Kim, "Being Swaminarayan: The Ontology and Significance of Belief in the Construction of a Gujarati Diaspora," PhD diss., (Columbia University, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Arun Brahmbhatt, "Scholastic Publics: Sanskrit Textual Practices in Gujarat, 1800-Present," PhD diss., (University of Toronto, 2018); Brian Hatcher, *Hinduism Before Reform* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Anand Pandian, "Tradition in fragments: Inherited forms and fractures in the ethics of south India," *American Ethnologist: Journal of the American Ethnological Society* 35, no. 3 (August 2008): 466—480.

<sup>5</sup> Alister McIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, third edition (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 19.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London: Verso, 1985), 73, cited in Pandian, "Tradition in Fragments," 470.

irretrievably.”<sup>7</sup> As Pandian observed among contemporary South Indian agricultural workers, Hindu traditions survive and expand by juxtaposing disjointed cultural references and mingling sources from other traditions.<sup>8</sup> Analyzing Sahajānand’s tradition as mosaic is a way of understanding his religious innovation as a novel combination of sources from multiple pre-existing traditions.

Fragments of multiple traditions mingled in the life and teaching of Sahajānand Svāmī. Brian Hatcher proposes the concept of “complex agency” to analyze how Sahajānand’s Sampradāy was shaped both by itself and by others.<sup>9</sup> I argue that the Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy is the mosaic formation of Sahajānand Svāmī’s complex agency. The plurality of sources in Sahajānand’s Sampradāy—medieval Vedānta theology, Mughal, Sufi-inflected devotion, Gujarati codes of conduct, and North Indian Kṛṣṇa bhakti—attracted new followers and accommodated their preexisting practices and understandings of devotional life. The incongruities of different religious fragments in Sahajānand’s teaching did not stultify or disable but rather enlivened his communal devotional discourse by repurposing devotional sources that were already charged with meaning. I further suggest that fragments of religious sources and meanings survive alongside one another in the Svāminārāyaṇ tradition of today. This internal diversity provides a crucial context for the rest of this dissertation that studies recent sectarian Svāminārāyaṇ leaders who seek to bowdlerize and codify Sahajānand’s teaching.

This chapter outlines the theological, historical, and devotional sources Sahajānand drew upon to form the Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy. By surveying the scholarly literature on Sahajānand, we can identify fragments of several traditions lodged within the Sampradāy, some of which the

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<sup>7</sup> Pandian, “Tradition in Fragments,” 470.

<sup>8</sup> Pandian, “Tradition in Fragments,” 476.

<sup>9</sup> Hatcher, *Before Reform*, 82.

devotional community acknowledges and others they do not. The first sections introduce Sahajānand’s theological teaching within the context of the theistic Vedānta tradition. The chapter then moves through the early life of Sahajānand Svāmī, his regulation of devotee conduct, and his colonial encounters. Finally, it examines the Gujarati devotional milieu—of Kṛṣṇa bhakti, Sufi Islam, and the Vallabha Sampradāy—from which Sahajānand drew many fragments to form the mosaic of the Svāminārāyaṇ tradition. Throughout this survey, the chapter considers BAPS’ relation to Sahajānand’s early following and its reinterpretation of his teaching.

What did he teach? Sahajānand propounded a worldview that he identified as Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, or a qualified non-dualist form of Vedānta. To contextualize his teaching, the following sections give a brief outline for each of these three philosophical labels, first “Vedānta,” then “non-dualism,” and then its “qualified” version. After this exposition, we can return to Sahajānand’s particular teaching and its interpretation by later Svāminārāyaṇ followers.

### *Vedānta and Śaṅkara’s Advaita*

Vedānta, or the end of the Vedas, is a philosophical tradition rooted in commentaries on the *Upaniṣads*, the final collection of Vedic texts. The *Upaniṣads* are generally critical of earlier Vedic ritualism, siding instead with the path of philosophical contemplation. The author Bādarāyaṇa systematized their philosophy in the *Brahma Sūtras*, also known as the *Vedānta Sūtras*, around the year 400 CE.<sup>10</sup> Bādarāyaṇa is also identified as Vyasa, the traditional author of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Together, the principal *Upaniṣads*, the *Brahma Sūtras*, and the *Bhagavad Gītā* constitute the textual canon of Vedānta.<sup>11</sup> In the *Brahma Sūtras*, Bādarāyaṇa argues the entire purpose of the *Upaniṣads* is to know brahman, the Absolute and ultimate source of the universe. Knowledge of brahman, or brahmajñāna, is central to Vedānta

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<sup>10</sup> Mysore Hiriyanna, *Outlines of Indian Philosophy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1958 [1932]), 336—338.

<sup>11</sup> Arun Brahmabhatt, “The Swaminarayan Commentarial Tradition,” in *Swaminarayan Hinduism: Tradition, Adaptation, Identity*, eds. Raymond B. Williams and Yogi Trivedi (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016), 140.

thought and often considered the key for a soul's ultimate liberatio (mokṣa). Still, the foundational Vedānta texts remain ambiguous on the relationship between the individual soul (ātman or jīva), and the universal brahman, leaving them open to several schools of interpretation.

The eighth-century philosopher Śaṅkara, or Śaṅkarācārya, is the most influential Vedānta thinker who systematized the school of non-dualism, or Advaita. He wrote commentaries on the principal *Upanishads*, the *Brahma Sūtras*, and the *Bhagavad Gītā*, setting a precedent for all later Vedāntin teachers (ācāryas) to write their own commentaries on the three texts.<sup>12</sup> In Śaṅkara's Advaita, the world is caused by and dependent upon brahman. Brahman exceeds the world and is not equivalent to it, but the world shares the same nature as brahman, like a pot has the same nature as clay. The two are not ontologically distinct; they are non-dual.<sup>13</sup> It is only flawed human perception that separates the world from brahman. It is also a flawed perception to think that all sentient and non-sentient entities are distinct ontological beings, as in the perception that the clay pot is different from a stone, or a tree, or a human. Śaṅkara's Advaita is often remembered as asserting that the manifest world is an illusion (māyā) and does not truly exist.<sup>14</sup> However, as Anantanand Rambachan has shown, Śaṅkara does not describe the world as an illusion but only the perception of the world as existing independently from brahman as the illusion; "So, the

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<sup>12</sup> Brahmabhatt notes that founders of other Vedānta schools did not necessarily complete commentaries on all three texts, as Śaṅkara did. In such cases, the ācārya's followers or descendants wrote commentaries in their stead. Rāmānujācārya (eleventh to twelfth century), the founder of qualified non-dualism, wrote commentaries on the *Brahma Sūtras* and *Bhagavad Gītā*, but only a treatise on the *Upanishads*. His later disciple, Ranga Rāmānuja, wrote a commentary on the principal Upanishads in the seventeenth century: Brahmabhatt, "Commentarial Tradition," 140—141.

<sup>13</sup> Anantanand Rambachan, *The Advaita Worldview: God, World, and Humanity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 74—76.

<sup>14</sup> Rao has argued that the Advaita view of the natural world as māyā is a "post Śaṅkarite myth": Srinivasa Rao, "Two Myths in Advaita," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 24, no.3 (June 1996): 265—279, cited in Rambachan, *Advaita Worldview*, 73.

negation of the world, as conceived by Śaṅkara, is more a transformation, re-organization and revaluation than a wholesale annihilation.”<sup>15</sup>

Śaṅkara’s central teaching is the identification of the self (ātman) with brahman. Śaṅkara argues that brahman is nirguṇa (without qualities) because human words are unable to define it. Brahman is therefore indefinable and ultimately unknowable. His description of brahman is thus apophatic in the Upaniṣadic sense of “not this, not that” (neti neti). To describe brahman, Śaṅkara instead turns to the great Upaniṣadic statements, the mahāvākyas, like “you are that” (tat tvam asi) in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, and “this ātman is brahman” (ayam ātmā brahma) in the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*.<sup>16</sup> For Śaṅkara and most Vedāntins, the ātman is not the body, the senses, nor the mind. The ātman is awareness, that which perceives the thoughts and sensations of the mind and body. This awareness is not limited by time or space, and it does not live, grow, and die with the body. It is also identical in all living beings; the ātman is in all living beings, and all beings are within ātman. For Śaṅkara, the false perception of “I” as an individual, distinct self is the root of human bondage, and liberation is the removal of this erroneous idea to know the ātman’s non-dual nature, identical with brahman and all other beings. With this understanding, a liberated self is released from the cycle of rebirth and merges with brahman, as the famous analogy goes, like a water droplet in the ocean. Thus, the self does not need to change, become, or achieve something to attain mokṣa. It only needs to realize its true non-dual, advaita nature.<sup>17</sup>

Later schools of Vedānta all position themselves in relation to Śaṅkara’s Advaita as a common inter-textual reference point. The most widespread schools of Vedānta, after Śaṅkara’s, are described as “theistic” Vedānta, which unite his understanding of ātman and brahman with the

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<sup>15</sup> Rambachan, *Advaita Worldview*, 78.

<sup>16</sup> Hiriyan, *Outlines*, 374—375.

<sup>17</sup> Rambachan, *Advaita Worldview*, 100—101.

imperative of devotion to a personal god. The Vaiṣṇava Vedāntins, those espousing devotion to a form of Viṣṇu, include Rāmānuja (eleventh-twelfth centuries), Madhva (thirteenth century), Nimbārka (thirteenth century), Vallabha (fifteenth-sixteenth centuries), and Chaitanya (fifteenth-sixteenth centuries), just to name the most prominent. Rāmānuja systematized the school of thought called Viśiṣṭādvaita (qualified non-dualism) and he often counterposed his thinking with Śāṅkara's. Rāmānuja's "theistic" understanding of brahman, which he also calls *īśvara* (God), contrasts in important ways from Śāṅkara's absolute, non-dual brahman.

*Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita*

Rāmānuja taught of three distinct entities that are eternal and real: 1) *īśvara* or brahman, 2) *ātman* or *cit* (sentience), and 3) *acit* (insentient matter) or *māyā*, the material universe. Rāmānuja agreed with Śāṅkara that the universe was caused by and dependent upon brahman and that the individual *ātman* could attain *mokṣa* and merge with brahman. However, Rāmānuja disagreed with Śāṅkara's point that the material universe and the *ātman* had the same nature. For Rāmānuja, brahman has a body-soul relationship (*śarīra-śarīri-bhāva*) with both the material world and all *jīvas*.<sup>18</sup> Brahman is the soul and cause of all *māyā* and is the *antaryāmī* (literally "indwelling driver") within all *jīvas*. As the *antaryāmī*, brahman witnesses all of the *jīva*'s inner thoughts and actions and has the power to control them.<sup>19</sup> However, Rāmānuja argued that the *jīva* is not fully identical, or non-dual, with brahman. For Rāmānuja, brahman is distinct from *māyā* and *jīva* because of its essential, perfect qualities and its freedom from any imperfections.

Rāmānuja argues that brahman has definite names, forms, and qualities. Rāmānuja thus conceives of brahman as *saguṇa* (with qualities). Rāmānuja emphasizes the names of "Puruṣottam," the supreme person whose body is the cosmos; "Bhagavān," the Lord who is worthy

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<sup>18</sup> In this chapter, I use the terms "ātman" and "jīva" interchangeably to describe the spiritual self. John Carman, *The Theology of Rāmānuja: An Essay in Interreligious Understanding* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 125.

<sup>19</sup> Niriyaṇa, *Outlines*, 407.

of worship; and “Nārāyaṇa,” a name of Viṣṇu, who is revered as superior of Brahmā and Śiva.<sup>20</sup> Sometimes Rāmānuja describes brahman’s essence in two definitive qualities: jñāna (knowledge) and ānanda (bliss).<sup>21</sup> In addition to these names and qualities, Rāmānuja also describes brahman as possessing infinite positive qualities and infinite names, so many that he is unknowable to the human mind. In this sense brahman’s incomprehensibility, Rāmānuja also describes brahman as nirguṇa (without qualities) like Śaṅkara. Thus, Rāmānuja’s Viśiṣṭādvaita accommodates both saṅguṇa and nirguṇa understandings of brahman.

Rāmānuja’s Vedānta also posits four, or possibly five, forms of brahman that make him both transcendently supreme and also personally accessible to those jīvas who are devoted to him. One form is the vyūha (supreme reality) that creates, sustains, and dissolves the material universe. The next form is para (above, superior), in which brahman has one eternal, celestial, and beautiful form residing with his consort Śrī in a divine abode where an infinite retinue of attendants serves them. In this supreme form, brahman rules over the universe and remains utterly inaccessible and incomprehensible to the jīvas bounded in māyā. Thus it is also called his sūkṣma (subtle) form because of its inscrutability.<sup>22</sup> Both in its form as the vyūha creator and the supreme para, Rāmānuja often describes brahman’s relationship to the universe as a king to his subjects or a master to his slaves.<sup>23</sup>

This transcendent brahman takes other forms to make himself available to jīvas out of his great mercy and compassion. Brahman’s third form as vibhava or avatāra (manifestations or descensions) to Earth in forms such as Rāma and Kṛṣṇa. Brahman takes these forms to restore righteousness and allow devotees to know him through his form, words, and deeds. Fourth,

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<sup>20</sup> Carman, *Theology of Rāmānuja*, 158—166.

<sup>21</sup> Carman, *Theology of Rāmānuja*, 111—112.

<sup>22</sup> Carman, *Theology of Rāmānuja*, 173—174.

<sup>23</sup> Carman, *Theology of Rāmānuja*, 179.

Rāmānuja also taught that brahman exists as the antaryāmī, dwelling inside every ātman, as mentioned above. The antaryāmī is the soul of every ātman, sustains its life, and witnesses its actions, but it still allows the ātman agency to make its own choices. Rāmānuja’s followers in the Śrī Vaiṣṇava community also ascribe to a fifth form as arca that resides in mūrtis (consecrated sacred images). Rāmānuja himself practiced worship of sacred images, but he never wrote about arca as a form of brahman.<sup>24</sup>

For Rāmānuja, a jīva that understands these forms of brahman will worship Viṣṇu and cultivate devotion for him. The, at least, four forms of brahman establish an understanding of a transcendent lord on a cosmic scale, who occasionally descends to Earth as an avatāra and always abides within every ātman. In contrast to liberation by knowledge in Śāṅkara’s Advaita, Rāmānuja’s Viśiṣṭādvaita teaches that devotional practice to Viṣṇu will bring a jīva to mokṣa. By his grace, brahman grants liberation to those who are devoted to him, take refuge in him, or resolve to follow his will.<sup>25</sup>

Fragments of Rāmānuja’s theistic Vedānta are maintained within the Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy, although their ontologies are not systematically aligned. Sahajānand Svāmī claimed to teach Rāmānuja’s school of Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, but as Arun Brahmbhatt has argued, “this claim should not be taken at face value.”<sup>26</sup> Sahajānand inherited the connection to Viśiṣṭādvaita from his guru, Rāmānanda Svāmī.<sup>27</sup> As a young man, Rāmānanda traveled south to Srirangam,

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<sup>24</sup> Carman, *Theology of Rāmānuja*, 181.

<sup>25</sup> Hirianna, *Outlines*, 383, 412—413.

<sup>26</sup> Arun Brahmbhatt, “Scholastic Publics: Sanskrit Textual Practices in Gujarat, 1800-Present,” PhD diss., (University of Toronto, 2018), 206.

<sup>27</sup> This Svāmī Rāmānanda (1738—1858) is not to be confused with the twelfth- to thirteenth-century philosopher ascetic by the same name, who founded the Ramanandi order of sadhus. However, he shares some similarities with his predecessor. Thirteenth-century Rāmānanda developed the Viśiṣṭādvaita philosophy of Rāmānuja and is remembered as the crucial link that brought this school of Vedānta to North India, as Hawley explains (2015, 102). Teaching in Varanasi, he had twelve influential disciples, including Kabir, the great bhakti poet. The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Rāmānanda is said to have traveled south to Śrīraṅgam, Tamil Nadu, where Rāmānuja came to him in a dream and initiated him into his order of sādhus. He then spread Rāmānuja’s teaching in Gujarat.

Tamil Nadu, where he said Rāmānuja appeared to him in a dream, initiated him as a sādhu, and directed him to found a sampradāy. Following his guru, Sahajānand praised Rāmānuja and espoused certain tenets of his Viśiṣṭādvaita teaching. However, throughout his teaching in the *Vacanāmṛt*, the collection of his spiritual discourses, Sahajānand espoused not three but five ontological realities: jīva, māyā, īśvara, brahman, and parabrahman. This five-fold system bears more in common with the ontology of Vyasa, author of the *Brahma Sūtras*. Furthermore, at times, Sahajānand said that Vyasa was superior to all other Vedānta ācāryas after him, including Rāmānuja.<sup>28</sup> While Sahajānand affiliated himself with Rāmānuja, his teaching diverged on fundamental, ontological issues.

Why, then, did Sahajānand Svāmī claim Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta? Another way of understanding the Svāminārāyaṇ affiliation with Viśiṣṭādvaita is to consider the importance of philosophical credentials in the historical development of the early Sampradāy. Sahajānand’s status as an ācārya was contested because he never authored commentaries on Vedānta texts himself; he left the task of commentaries to his followers. The first Svāminārāyaṇ *Brahma Sūtra* commentarial text was produced within two decades of Sahajānand’s death in 1830, and Brahmbhatt argues, “this text is best read as a nascent *sampradāy*’s desire to swiftly make its debut within a Vedānta scholastic public.”<sup>29</sup> In Western India at that time, some schools of Vedānta were already spoken for: Śāṅkara’s Advaita was claimed by many, including the powerful Śāradā Pīṭha in Dwarka, and Suddhadvaita was taught by the Vallabha Sampradāy, which was prevalent in Gujarat. Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta was a recognized school of thought, but it was an unclaimed position in Western India at the time. Rāmānuja’s system thus presented an open seat at the

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<sup>28</sup> Brahmbhatt, “Scholastic Publics,” 149—152.

<sup>29</sup> Brahmbhatt, “Scholastic Publics,” 170.

Vedānta table to the Svāminārāyaṇs. By aligning with Viśiṣṭādvaita, the young Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy sought to distinguish itself from other Vedānta institutions and establish its scholastic rigor.

### *Svāminārāyaṇ Vedānta*

The affiliation with Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta provided more of a backdrop for Sahajānand's teaching than an organizing framework. His five-fold Svāminārāyaṇ ontology is consistent with Viśiṣṭādvaita in its understanding of māyā and jīva. Like Rāmānuja, he also taught of a śārīra-śārīri-bhāva (analogous body-soul relationship) between the universe of māyā and parabrahman.<sup>30</sup> Sahajānand understood the material universe to be created by parabrahman and dependent upon it as a sustaining life-force. The two are ontologically distinct, and māyā is understood to be eternally real, as opposed to the teaching of Advaitins after Śaṅkara. The body-soul analogy is also descriptive of parabrahman's relationship to the individual soul (jīva); it is the soul's soul and animating life force. As for Rāmānuja, Sahajānand taught that every jīva experiences parabrahman as its antaryāmī, residing within and witnessing its thoughts and actions. The jīva is also finite and atomic in size, contained inside the body during its time in māyā, but eternal and existing before and after the body's life.

Sahajānand's unique teaching is the separation of what Rāmānuja called brahman into three distinct entities: 1) īśvara, 2) brahman (or akṣarbrahman), and 3) parabrahman. Sahajānand's parabrahman (highest brahman) is the most powerful of these three and most similar to Rāmānuja's brahman in its transcendent, para form, reigning over and controlling the entire universe like a king in his abode. Parabrahman is also called Puruṣottam (the supreme person), and he has a definite human form. Sahajānand says it is imperative to understand that parabrahman is sākār

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<sup>30</sup> Sadhu Paramattvadas, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hindu Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 83.

(with form). However, he also accommodates both *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* understandings of his infinite positive qualities and complete absence of any negative qualities, like Rāmānuja.

Sahajānand describes the *sākār* form of parabrahman thus:

The form is dark, but due to the intensity of the light, it appears to be rather fair, not dark. The form has two arms and two legs, not four, eight or a thousand arms; and its appearance is very captivating. The form is extremely serene. It appears like a human in shape and is youthful. Sometimes that form in the divine light is seen standing, sometimes sittings, and at other times, it is seen walking around.<sup>31</sup>

Sahajānand describes parabrahman as a simple, young, and attractive human form, which at other points, he identifies as himself.

Like Rāmānuja, Sahajānand taught that transcendent parabrahman mercifully makes himself available to humankind by manifesting on Earth. However, unlike Ramanuja, he described himself as one such manifestation. Sahajānand's teaching on his divine nature was not always consistent and has led to multiple interpretations by later Svāminārāyaṇ followers. Some understand Sahajānand to be an *avatāra*, like Rāma and Kṛṣṇa, that Rāmānuja described as coequal forms of brahman. The original Svāminārāyaṇ temples, where this view is shared, teach that Sahajānand has the same metaphysical nature as the other *avatāras*, but he is their ultimate and unsurpassed manifestation. Other Svāminārāyaṇ followers, like those in BAPS, consider Sahajānand to be a manifestation of parabrahman that is metaphysically distinct from the *avatāras*, who are not forms of parabrahman but a lower order of beings called *īśvaras*. Rather than an *avatāra*, Sahajānand is called the *avatārin*, the cause or sender of the *avatārs*.<sup>32</sup> In this view, the birth of Sahajānand in 1781 was the only time that parabrahman chose to make himself manifest in the human realm instead of sending another *avatāra*.

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<sup>31</sup> *The Vacanāmṛt: Spiritual Discourses of Bhagwān Swāminārāyaṇ*, Gadhada 2.13, trans. BAPS Sadhus (Ahmedabad: Swaminarayan Aksharpath, 2014), 444.

<sup>32</sup> Paramtattvadas, *Swaminarayan Theology*, 140—141.

Brahman, which Sahajānand also called akṣarbrahman, is a second divine entity, also eternally free from the influence of māyā but lower than, dependent upon, and subservient to parabrahman. The addition of a second, transcendental brahman has been productively analyzed as Sahajānand’s articulation of the bhakti relationship between God and devotee within a Vedānta intellectual framework.<sup>33</sup> That is, even though parabrahman is superior to and distinct from the rest of the universe, he does not exist in solitude in his transcendent abode. Since it is imperative for parabrahman always to be worshiped, it is eternally accompanied and praised by its ideal devotee, brahman or akṣarbrahman. Sahajānand describes akṣarbrahman as having multiple forms, some of which are saḡuṇa and others nirḡuṇa. Its first saḡuṇa form is the transcendent abode, or Akṣardhām, the celestial paradise where parabrahman resides. In this form, akṣarbrahman ensures that parabrahman lives in continual, perfect comfort and enjoys unlimited bliss. In a second saḡuṇa form, akṣarbrahman is simultaneously the ideal servant within that abode, in a human form, eternally serving and worshiping parabrahman.

Sahajānand’s followers still debate the nature of akṣarbrahman today. Some Svāminārāyaṇ followers in the original temples understand there to be infinite akṣarbrahmans, one for each liberated jīva. When a jīva attains mokṣa, it arrives in akṣardhām and is transformed into an akṣarbrahman, in which form it worships parabrahman and is eternally blessed by his presence. By contrast, BAPS teaches there is only one akṣarbrahman, distinct from the liberated jīvas, who leads them in worship as the first, perfect, and unparalleled servant to parabrahman. These two schools of thought on akṣarbrahman’s form in the paradise of akṣardhām also translated into two understandings of its presence on Earth.

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<sup>33</sup> Smit Gadhia, “Akshara and its Four Forms in Swaminarayan’s Doctrine,” in Williams and Trivedi, *Swaminarayan Hinduism*, 156—171.

All Svāminārāyaṇ communities teach that akṣarbrahman has a nirguṇa form in the material universe, called the cidākāśa. Additionally, some guru-led communities also teach that their guru is akṣarbrahman's saguṇa form on Earth. The two parts of the cidākāśa's name, ci[t]-ākāśa (sentience-space), begin to describe the nature of this subtle, nirguṇa form.<sup>34</sup> Cidākāśa is an all-pervasive, luminous consciousness that pervades every atom and vacuous space of material existence. Truer to say that material existence is within it because the cidākāśa exceeds, contains, and supports all of māyā. The cidākāśa is the form that allows akṣbrahman to support and sustain the physical universe, and, for many Svāminārāyaṇ followers, this nirguṇa form is its only presence within māyā. Their devotional focus thus centers on the historical figure of Sahajānand Svāmī and his transcendent form in akṣardhāma, where they aim to join him and become akṣarbrahman after liberation.

Guru-led Svāminārāyaṇ communities, like BAPS, maintain that akṣbrahman has one further, saguṇa form as the brahmasvarūpa (form of brahman) guru who leads their following. Just as parabrahman always has a worshiping devotee present with him in paradise, Sahajānand also had an ideal devotee during his time on Earth, whom BAPS identifies as Guṇātītānand Svāmī (1784—1867). Guṇātītānand Svāmī was one of Sahajānand's senior sādhus, the leader of the temple in Junagadh, and the first figure in BAPS' sectarian guru lineage. BAPS places particular emphasis on Sahajānand's teaching of pragāṭa (presence), which supports their belief that akṣbrahman has a continuous presence on Earth in the form of the current brahmasvarūpa guru.<sup>35</sup> Thus the BAPS guru is thus not considered human or a jīva. He is ontologically distinct as akṣbrahman, the perfect devotee to parabrahman, and the one being on Earth who is not bound

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<sup>34</sup> Paramtattvadas, *Swaminarayan Theology*, 192.

<sup>35</sup> Paramtattvadas, *Swaminarayan Theology*, 209.

within or limited by māyā. As BAPS sādhus describe him, the guru is the bridge that parabrahman crosses to remain present on Earth.<sup>36</sup> The guru's relationship to parabrahman is often explained through the bodily senses; parabrahman sees through the guru's eyes and hears through the guru's ears. In this way, the BAPS interpretation extends akṣarbrahman's saguṇa form into the māyik world and codifies its presence, and by extension parabrahman's presence, within their following. Thus, their devotion is dually focused both on 1) the guru as akṣarbrahman, who can best connect them with 2) parabrahman, both in this world and after attaining liberation.

The fifth ontological reality in Sahajānand's teaching are the īśvaras. The īśvaras' cosmic role is somewhat delimited in comparison to akṣarbrahman's and parabrahman's. In contrast to the latter two, īśvaras are considered to be bound within and limited by māyā. They have superhuman powers within the māyik world, but these are delegated to them by parabrahman. The īśvaras encompass many other gods in the wider Hindu world, including Brahmā, Vāsudeva, Sūrya, Agni, Indra, Viṣṇu, and Śiva. Some of them, like Brahmā, play important roles in Sahajānand's description of the creation of the māyik universe, which is baroque.<sup>37</sup> Within māyā, parabrahman assigns each īśvara to a specific sphere of influence in the natural world as well as within the human senses and mental faculties. For example, Sūrya presides over the Sun and the sense of

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<sup>36</sup> Paramtattvadas, *Swaminarayan Theology*, 207—208.

<sup>37</sup> Sahajānand's understanding of creation fits within a cyclical worldview and thus begins at the end of the previous multiverse, when all matter and sentience are in a state of final dissolution. Creation begins when parabrahman looks at akṣarbrahman and inspires it to start the process. Akṣarbrahman then selects one liberated soul from akṣardhām, who becomes the mūla-puruṣa (first/root-human) and is paired with the matter of the previous multiverse, called mūla-prakṛti (root-nature). The mūla-puruṣa stirs prakṛti from its dormant state. Parabrahman then enters this first pair and empowers it to generate infinite copies of itself. Each of the innumerable pairs, called a pradhāna-puruṣa, becomes its own brahmāṇḍ (universe, or world), which contains fourteen lokas (realms, or levels), with seven hells below, six heavens above, and the human realm in the middle. Each brahmāṇḍ is a living being and first develops an īśvara, a Virāṭa-puruṣa, which is its soul. Then each brahmāṇḍ develops its body from the three qualities of nature: 1) sattva (light) creates its cosmic consciousness and the īśvaras who govern the senses; 2) rājas (passion) creates the senses, the intellect, and vital breath; and 3) tāmas (darkness) creates the five 'gross' elements: space, air, light, water, and earth. The Virāṭa-puruṣa then creates Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Maheśa to oversee creation, sustenance, and dissolution. Brahmā creates two orders of īśvaras—the first led by his son Marīci, the second led by Kaśyapa—which are both called Prajāpatīs (lords of the people). The Prajāpatīs then create lower deities, demons, humans, animals, and plants. Paramtattvadas, *Swaminarayan Theology*, 262—266.

sight; Agni governs fire and the faculty of speech.<sup>38</sup> Some Svāminārāyaṇ followers also consider the avatāras like Rāma and Kṛṣṇa to be īśvaras, sent by parabrahman, the avatārin, to accomplish specific tasks and restore order in the human realm. Like jīvas, the īśvaras must come to a proper understanding and worship parabrahman in order to attain mokṣa, escape the world of māyā, and reach the eternal paradise of akṣardhām.<sup>39</sup>

In sum, Sahajānand Svāmī and the early Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy self-consciously positioned themselves within the venerable Vedānta tradition. Viśiṣṭādvaita did not determine Svāminārāyaṇ Vedānta as much as it provided a legitimating reference point, in relation to which Sahajānand could present his theology. In his discourses, Sahajānand reveres and cites the Vedānta canon of the principle *Upaniṣads*, *Brahma Sūtras*, and most often the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Sahajānand maintained a Vedānta view of the self that dates back to Śāṅkara, as an eternal consciousness that is not the human body or mind. However, he fundamentally disagreed with Śāṅkara's understanding of brahman as solely nirguṇa (without qualities) and taught that brahman and parabrahman were sākār and saguṇa as well. Like Rāmānuja, he incorporated Vaiṣṇava devotion for a personalized god into a Vedānta worldview. Sahajānand's five-fold ontology aligns with Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita on the nature of māyā, jīva, and certain characteristics of (para)brahman. More often, though, the two diverged. Where Rāmānuja saw fit to assign multiple forms to a singular brahman, Sahajānand described three distinct realities: parabrahman, akṣarbrahman, and īśvaras. Sahajānand not only taught an ontological system, he also identified himself as a divinity within it. While Sahajānand set about forming the Svāminārāyaṇ devotional community, as Brahmabhatt suggests, he allied himself with Vedānta and Viśiṣṭādvaita to establish its

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<sup>38</sup> Paramattvadas, *Swaminarayan Theology*, 240.

<sup>39</sup> Paramattvadas, *Swaminarayan Theology*, 236—237.

philosophical bone fides and distinguish itself from other institutions. The following section turns to the story of how Sahajānand came to lead that community, which casts light on other traditions besides Vedānta that influenced the early Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy.

### *Early Life of Sahajānand Svāmī*

Sahajānand Svāmī's life began far from the region of Gujarat, which would later become the center of his Sampradāy. He was born in the village of Chhapaiya, in present-day Uttar Pradesh, roughly ten miles from Ayodhya, the birthplace of Rāma. His birth also fell on the festival day that celebrates Rāma's birth, called Rāmanavami. By the Vikram Samvat lunar calendar, this was the ninth day of the bright fortnight of the month of Chaitra in the year 1837. By the Gregorian solar calendar, this was April 3, 1781 CE.<sup>40</sup> The connections between his and Rāma's births were the first of many divine associations the hagiographic literature ascribes to Sahajānand's early years. He was born to a Brahmin family of the Sārvarīya sub-caste, with the surname Pande. The Sampradāy remembers his parents, Hariprasad and Premvati Pande, by the names of Dharmadev (Lord of Duty) and Bhaktimātā (Mother of Devotion). This son of Dharma and Bhakti was named Ghaṅśyām (Dark Cloud), which is also an epithet of Kṛṣṇa. Ghaṅśyām was the second of three Pande sons. His elder brother was named Rāmpratāp, and his younger was Iccharām. Much later in his life, Sahajānand would appoint each of his brothers' sons to be the administrative leaders of the Sampradāy, to sit on the gādis (thrones) as its two ācāryas. The Pande family line still oversees the two Svāminārāyaṇ gādis today.

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<sup>40</sup> There have been discrepancies in dating moments from Sahajānand's life because of calculating errors in converting lunar calendars to solar calendars. For example, some early accounts dated his birth in 1870. More recent studies have resolved these discrepancies: see Raymond B. Williams, *Introduction to Swaminarayan Hinduism, Third Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 14n1; also Sadhu Paramtattvadas and Raymond B. Williams with an Appendix on Historical Dating by Sadhu Amrutvijaydas, "Swaminarayan and British Contacts in Gujarat in the 1820s," in Williams and Trivedi, *Swaminarayan Hinduism*, 84—98.

Hagiographic accounts of Ghaṅṣyām’s childhood are full of miraculous events that prefigure his later teachings and connect him with Kṛṣṇa. In these stories, Ghaṅṣyām’s parents were convinced of his divinity from a young age. As an infant, Ghaṅṣyām revealed his divine form to his mother, Bhaktimātā, one day while she bathed him. He did so with power that would later give him charismatic authority in Gujarat: placing others into a trance-like state called samādhi, in which they would experience divine bliss and have visions of God. When Ghaṅṣyām put Bhaktimātā into samādhi, she had visions of traveling through the cosmos with him, seeing the expanse of the universe, deities and sages in different worlds, and finally arriving in Akṣardhām where she saw her son being worshiped by a host of liberated souls.<sup>41</sup> Afterward, Bhaktimātā was convinced that her son was divine. This story also parallels one of Kṛṣṇa’s childhood incidents when his mother, Devika, saw the entire universe when she looked inside his mouth. Throughout his life, Sahajānand often overlapped his biography and identity with Kṛṣṇa’s.

Ghaṅṣyām’s father, Dharmadev, took slightly longer to convince. Dharmadev is said to have meditated on the image of Kṛṣṇa in his daily worship. One day, Ghaṅṣyām decided to reveal his divine form by appearing within his father’s worship, so when his father tried to visualize Kṛṣṇa, he could only see Ghaṅṣyām smiling back at him.<sup>42</sup> Dharmadev was confused but started to suspect his son had supernatural qualities. Later, Ghaṅṣyām accompanied his father to a scholarly debate in the holy city of Varanasi. There, Dharmadev served as the moderator for a debate between pandits of different philosophical schools. After listening for some time, ten-year-old Ghaṅṣyām is said to have intervened, resolved their debate, and articulated the philosophy of Viśiṣṭādvaita.<sup>43</sup> The elderly scholars were said to be amazed by the boy’s intellect and prostrated

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<sup>41</sup> Yogi Trivedi, *Bhagwan Swaminarayan: The Story of His Life* (Ahmedabad: Swaminarayan Aksharpath, 2014), 30—32.

<sup>42</sup> Trivedi, *Bhagwan Swaminarayan*, 17—18.

<sup>43</sup> Trivedi, *Bhagwan Swaminarayan*, 32—34.

at his feet. Dharmadev then knew his son was destined to be a great religious thinker. In these hagiographies, Ghaṇṣyām's childhood is dedicated to scriptural studies, loving devotion for his parents, and miracles of putting others into samādhi.

Later in life, Sahajānand Svāmī would say that one of the reasons he came to Earth was to free the souls of his parents, both of whom passed before his eleventh birthday. Soon after the debate in Varanasi, Bhaktimātā passed away. On her deathbed, according to the devotional literature, Ghaṇṣyām explained one means of liberation to her, that one's final thought before death determines the soul's transmigration. If one thinks of God, their soul will be liberated, but if one thinks of family matters, money, or other earthly attachments, they will be reborn in this world. In her last moments, Bhaktimātā focused on Akṣardhām, and Ghaṇṣyām granted her soul liberation.<sup>44</sup> Dharmadev passed just a few months later. On his father's last day, Ghaṇṣyām put him into samādhi, giving him visions of the cosmos and Akṣardhām. With his last words, Dharmadev praised his son as parabrahman, the highest God, and Ghaṇṣyām liberated his soul as well.<sup>45</sup> With the duty to his parents fulfilled, Ghaṇṣyām prepared for his next phase of life as a wandering ascetic. He is said to have left home in the early morning of June 29, 1792, without telling his brothers, just eleven years old but ready to renounce his home and family.

As a young renunciant, he took the name "Nīlkaṇṭh Varṇī." Varṇī marked him as a high-caste religious student, and Nīlkaṇṭh (one with the blue throat) identified him with Śiva, the ultimate renunciant, whose throat turned blue when he swallowed a mythical poison to prevent it from destroying the world. Young Nīlkaṇṭh began his travels by heading north to the holy sites of the Himalayas. Brian Hatcher has noted that, at this point, the biography of Sahajānand Svāmī

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<sup>44</sup> Trivedi, *Bhagwan Swaminarayan*, 34—36.

<sup>45</sup> Trivedi, *Bhagwan Swaminarayan*, 38—39.

echoes some standard tropes of religious renouncers: an unannounced departure, shedding worldly possessions, and traveling to the Himalayas. Hatcher's point is to position Nīlkaṇṭh as a participant within the active religious culture of early colonial South Asia. Instead of a "solitary spiritual hero," he was likely formed by "countless individuals engaged in the same kind of pursuit, from solitary babas and fakirs to initiated members of mendicant orders, like the Dasnamis, Nath-Yogis, or Sufis."<sup>46</sup> Nīlkaṇṭh traveled along with other religious seekers through the Gangetic plane on Mughal-era roads and trade routes through the Himalayas. He followed established travel circuits to popular pilgrimage sites and festivals: first to Haridwar, Rishikesh, Badrinath, Kedarnath, and especially sites holy to Viṣṇu, like Muktinath. Crossing into present-day Nepal, Nīlkaṇṭh is said to have spent several months alone deep in the mountains before meeting an ascetic named Gopala Yogī. He studied under Gopala for more than a year, reciting the *Bhagavad Gītā* and mastering eightfold yoga. This is another archetypal moment in the story of a renunciant in South Asia, learning from a yogī in the mountains.

The next phase of Nīlkaṇṭh's travels brought him south, down from the mountains, and east to Bengal and Assam. In Svāminārāyaṇ narratives, eastern regions of India are often representative of dark magical practices of tāntra and śakti, associated with the worship of Śiva and the Goddess. Nīlkaṇṭh's encounters with ascetics in these parts became contests between his pure, restrained Vaiṣṇava devotion and their prideful and power-hungry spellcasting. In one instance, Nīlkaṇṭh arrived in a town called Sirpur, ruled by a pious king named Siddhavallabh, who invited him to stay in the capital for the rainy season.<sup>47</sup> Other tāntra ascetics were offended by the king's apparent favor for Nīlkaṇṭh. One day, a tāntrika decided to attack him and cast a spell

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<sup>46</sup> Brian Hatcher, *Hinduism Before Reform* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020), 107.

<sup>47</sup> Hatcher has postulated that Sirpur is likely the town of Sherpur, located in present-day Bangladesh; Hatcher, *Before Reform*, 113.

the sent a whirlwind barreling toward Nīlkaṇṭh as he sat in meditation under a tree. With a glance, Nīlkaṇṭh redirected the whirlwind, which turned back on the tāntrika himself and uprooted a different tree that fell on him.<sup>48</sup> King Siddhavallabh was impressed by several incidents of Nīlkaṇṭh deflecting and besting tāntra magic, so much so that he became a devotee of Kṛṣṇa. It is historically likely that Nīlkaṇṭh did encounter many such tāntra and śakti practitioners in his travels, but hagiographic accounts narrate these meetings to demonstrate the superiority of Vaiṣṇava bhakti over Śaiva and Goddess worship.

In total, Nīlkaṇṭh traveled around India for seven years and, in doing so, established his mastery of South Asian religion that he would draw upon when establishing his own Sampradāy. Triumphant stories like that in Sirpur followed Nīlkaṇṭh’s travels east to Assam, south to Puri, and eventually down to the peninsula’s southern tip before turning north-west toward Gujarat. As Hatcher has commented on Svāminārāyaṇ hagiographies of these heroic travels, “where there is Nilakantha, there is victory (*jaya*).”<sup>49</sup> Beginning in the Himalayas, this sojourn took him on a clockwise circumambulation of the Indian subcontinent: from north to the east, south, and west. This journey was Nīlkaṇṭh’s version of a digvijaya (a “conquest of the quarters”), both a religious and political ritual. The digvijaya was initially the means for would-be kings to establish lordship over their given territory. In the fourteenth century, writings about Vedānta philosophers began using “digvijaya” to describe a scholar’s debates with competing schools of thought.<sup>50</sup> Here, Vedāntins established their intellectual dominance instead of the king’s military dominance. Likewise, Nīlkaṇṭh’s circumambulation of India gave him a religious bona fides that helped to establish himself as the lord over a new community of Vaiṣṇava devotees.

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<sup>48</sup> Trivedi, *Bhagwan Swaminarayan*, 68—69.

<sup>49</sup> Hatcher, *Before Reform*, 123.

<sup>50</sup> Brahmabhatt, “Scholastic Publics,” 29.

Nīlkaṅṭh arrived in Gujarat in 1799 and received initiation into the ascetic order of a guru called Svāmī Rāmānanda in 1800, at which point he received the name Sahajānand Svāmī. Rāmānanda’s following was known as the Uddhava Sampradāy, as his followers believed him to be a reincarnation of Uddhava, the close friend and counselor of Kṛṣṇa. Sahajānand studied under Rāmānanda for just under two years, learning Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, performing menial sevā, practicing yoga, and becoming even more strict in his brahmacarya (celibacy) discipline. Near the end of his life, Rāmānanda appointed Sahajānand as the ācārya of the Uddhava Sampradāy, which was a controversial decision. Sahajānand was younger than many sādhus in the Sampradāy, around twenty-one years old, and relatively new within the order. Some elder sādhus did not accept young Sahajānand’s authority and left the Sampradāy. A number of female devotees and ascetics also left because they found his practice of gender segregation unacceptable.<sup>51</sup> After this initial turmoil, however, Sahajānand’s following soon began to expand. Sahajānand gained notoriety around Gujarat for his ability to induce observers into samādhi. In his early years leading the Sampradāy, Sahajānand put hundreds of people—devotees, skeptics, Muslims, and Hindus—into samādhi. Their stories of samādhi travelled quickly; many reported visions of Sahajānand sitting on a throne in the highest heaven, often being worshiped by Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, and sometimes by Muhammed as well.<sup>52</sup>

Sahajānand Svāmī gave his followers the mantra “Svāminārāyaṇ” to chant as a means of focusing on parabrahman. Over time, they increasingly recognized him as Svāminārāyaṇ, the perfect manifestation of God on Earth. Sahajānand’s close disciples recorded his spiritual discourses between 1819 and 1829, which they compiled into the *Vacanāmṛt* (Immortal Nectar of

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<sup>51</sup> Manilal Parekh, *Shri Swami Narayan: The Gospel of Bhagavata-Dharma, or God in Redemptive Action* (Ahmedabad: Swaminarayan Aksharpath, 1988 [1936]), 30—35.

<sup>52</sup> Parekh, *Shri Swami Narayan*, 36—40; also Williams, *Introduction*, 23—24.

Speech), the central scripture of the Sampradāy. In these discourses, Sahajānand occasionally identifies himself with “Puruṣottam” (the supreme person). For example, in one discourse, Sahajānand explains that Puruṣottam has an eternal form that appears like a human, but radiant, exuding divine light; he concludes by saying, “Realize that the form amidst the divine light is the Mahārāj visible before you.”<sup>53</sup> His gradual identification as Puruṣottam was also not without controversy in the Sampradāy. As we explore later, Sahajānand eventually installed sacred images of himself in some early Svāminārāyaṇ temples, and even some of his most senior sādhus objected to this practice. While theological disagreements persist throughout Svāminārāyaṇ history, most of Sahajānand Svāmī’s followers came to accept him as Puruṣottam and called him Bhagvān (God) Svāminārāyaṇ during his lifetime. As his following expanded and his authority grew, the charismatic Sahajānand Svāmī would turn his attention to building his movement into an institution.

### *Conduct and Community*

Sahajānand Svāmī began to define membership in his Sampradāy through the regulation of devotee conduct, and he adopted norms from surrounding Gujarati communities in the process. His movement participated and flourished within a Gujarati devotional milieu that blurs contemporary distinctions between Hindu and Muslim. One religious community, called Satpanth (True Path), which exemplifies such hybrid and non-exclusive devotional practice, can be described as both devotional Hindu and Sufi Muslim, or neither.<sup>54</sup> The Satpanth community claims to have influenced Sahajānand Svāmī during his early years in Gujarat. Teena Purohit has explored the Satpanth-Svāminārāyaṇ overlap through two texts, the *Satpanth Yagna Vidhi* (Satpanth Rituals

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<sup>53</sup> *The Vachanāmṛt: Spiritual Discourses of Bhagvān Svāminārāyaṇ*, Gadhadā 2.13, trans. BAPS Sadhus (Ahmedabad: Swaminarayan Aksharpath, 2014), 448.

<sup>54</sup> Teena Purohit, *The Aga Khan Case: Religion and Identity in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 3.

and Procedures) and the *Śikṣāpatrī* (Letter of Instruction). Written in 1935, the *Yagna Vidhi* claims that, when Nīlkaṅṭh first arrived in Gujarat, he stayed in the village of Pirana, took initiation into the Satpanth order under a guru named Nanjikaka, received the name Haryakaka, and learned the Gujarati language. Young Haryakaka (aka Sahajānand) was later sent on a Satpanth fundraising mission to Surat, Gujarat, but he never returned, joining Rāmānanda’s Uddhava Sampradāy instead.<sup>55</sup> There is little if any historical evidence to verify the *Yagna Vidhi*’s claims, but more persuasive is Purohit’s analysis of the *Śikṣāpatrī* that demonstrates shared norms and restrictions among the two communities.

Both the Svāmīnārāyaṇ Sampradāy and the Satpanth community have texts called the *Śikṣāpatrī*, which establish codes of conduct for their devotees.<sup>56</sup> The two *Śikṣāpatrīs* share common injunctions around daily hygiene, business etiquette and documentation, prohibitions against consuming tobacco, onion, and garlic, as well as gambling, adultery, suicide, infanticide, and animal sacrifice.<sup>57</sup> Purohit thus argues that “Swami Narayan religious practices, which drew from multiple traditions, developed in a porous space.”<sup>58</sup> Whether or not Sahajānand ever joined the Satpanth community, his *Śikṣāpatrī* reflects the behavioral norms his Sampradāy shared with it and other devotional groups.

In 1826, Sahajānand Svāmī composed his *Śikṣāpatrī*, which prescribes a code of conduct for his followers in 212 verses. He established a strict set of rules that covered devotees’ morality, diet, financial dealings, and gender norms. Sahajānand asked householding devotees to take basic five vows upon joining the Sampradāy: 1) not to steal; 2) not to commit adultery; 3) not to eat

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<sup>55</sup> Purohit, *Aga Khan*, 100—101.

<sup>56</sup> As Purohit notes, “According to W. Ivanow, this Satpanth *Shikshāpatrī* is the name of the Marathi version of the *ginān*, and *So Kiriya* is the name of the Gujarati one.” Ivanow, W., *Collectanea: Volume I, Series A, No. 2* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1948), 145, cited in Purohit, *Aga Khan*, 166n58.

<sup>57</sup> Purohit, *Aga Khan*, 105.

<sup>58</sup> Purohit, *Aga Khan*, 109.

meat, onions, or garlic; 4) not to consume alcohol or other intoxicants; and 5) not to receive food from people of a caste lower than one's own.<sup>59</sup> I address to Sahajānand's approach to caste below. Though, in general, Sahajānand's teaching emphasized non-violence, banning animal sacrifice in rituals and ordering devotees to avoid killing even insects. The *Śikṣāpatrī* also tells devotees to make written records for every financial transaction, to conduct their business honestly and with witnesses present. Sahajānand formalized the expectation for householding devotees to donate either five or ten percent of their annual income to Svāminārāyaṇ temples. Finally, the *Śikṣāpatrī* directs devotees to maintain gender segregation in temples and during devotional assemblies, and it instructs women to dress modestly, serve and obey their husbands, and avoid other men who are not close relatives.<sup>60</sup>

The core of Sahajānand's new Sampradāy was an order of sādhus, ascetics, who still play an essential role in leading the movement today. Sahajānand required his renunciants sādhus to follow five strict vows, which set them apart and make their lives dramatically different from householding devotees'. The five ascetic vows are: 1) niṣkāṁ (non-lust), celibacy and avoiding the opposite sex; 2) nirlobh (non-greed), poverty and not touching money; 3) nisvād (non-taste), eating only plain vegetarian food mixed with water; 4) nisneh (non-affection), severing all ties with family relatives; and 5) nirmān (non-ego), humility and serving others. When Svāminārāyaṇ sādhus adopt these vows, they relinquish their former lives, such that many prefer not to speak of their lives before dīkṣa (initiation) at all. Their new lives are to be fully detached from worldly interests and entirely devoted to Svāminārāyaṇ. The *Śikṣāpatrī* also instructs sādhus to study the

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<sup>59</sup> Williams, *Introduction*, 23.

<sup>60</sup> *The Digital Shikshapatri*, Bodleian Library, via WayBack Machine, Archive.org, accessed April 27, 2021, [https://wayback.archive-it.org/org-467/20191016131352/http://www.shikshapatri.org.uk/~imagedb/hms/mss\\_browse.php?expand=638,639&act=chunit&unit=1](https://wayback.archive-it.org/org-467/20191016131352/http://www.shikshapatri.org.uk/~imagedb/hms/mss_browse.php?expand=638,639&act=chunit&unit=1).

scriptures, sleep on the ground, and travel in pairs, as to hold one another accountable. Sahajānand thus defined his two groups of devotees: householders and renunciants, through a series of prescriptions around their behavior.

The Sampradāy's rule-bound, disciplinary quality highlights the importance of its leader, lord, and founder, Sahajānand. Brian Hatcher argues the *Śikṣāpatrī* was an important means of constructing the Svāminārāyaṇ community, or “polity,” by defining the community as a rule-bound association.<sup>61</sup> According to Hatcher, members join the polity with “the choice to follow a certain rule and live in relation to a disciplinary habitus.”<sup>62</sup> To be a Svāminārāyaṇ devotee was to follow, or at least aspire toward, his code of conduct. The *Śikṣāpatrī* also cemented Sahajānand's status and teaching for the future of the Sampradāy. Sahajānand Svāmī claimed the *Śikṣāpatrī* was his own form personified in words, and he enjoined his followers to read the text every day as part of their worship rituals.<sup>63</sup> This injunction perpetuated Sahajānand's status as lord of the Sampradāy after his death and ensured that the regulation of conduct remained at the center of his devotees' everyday practice. Sahajānand Svāmī saw the *Śikṣāpatrī* as his way to remain present in his future devotees' lives. However, as I discuss later, guru-led groups like BAPS supplanted his written presence with the living presence of a brahmasvarūp guru.

Importantly for Hatcher, the early Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy was but one self-constituting association within a fluid landscape with overlapping realms of power. This gave the Sampradāy a “complex agency,” in being shaped by itself and by others.<sup>64</sup> Sahajānand did not present his lordship as the sole authority impacting the lives of his devotees. He constructed his Sampradāy

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<sup>61</sup> Hatcher, *Before Reform*, 81—84.

<sup>62</sup> Hatcher, *Before Reform*, 87.

<sup>63</sup> *The Digital Shikshapatri*, verses 208—209, accessed July 7, 2021, [https://wayback.archive-it.org/org-467/20191016135559/http://www.shikshapatri.org.uk/~imagedb/hms/mss\\_browse.php?expand=638,639&act=chunit&unit=208](https://wayback.archive-it.org/org-467/20191016135559/http://www.shikshapatri.org.uk/~imagedb/hms/mss_browse.php?expand=638,639&act=chunit&unit=208).

<sup>64</sup> Hatcher, *Before Reform*, 82.

in relation to other religious and political authorities, accommodating and complementing their influence. As mentioned above, Sahajānand's *Śikṣāpatrī* shares norms and behavior restrictions with the Satpanth community. The *Śikṣāpatrī* also explicitly references the authority of the Vallabha Sampradāy, the other established Kṛṣṇa-bhakti community in Gujarat, and advises devotees to follow their norms of fasting, temple worship, and celebrating festivals, like Navrātri. In the *Śikṣāpatrī*, Sahajānand also instructs his followers to honor Śiva by stopping, bowing, and taking darśan at any Śaiva temples they may pass. Even in this Vaiṣṇava Sampradāy, devotees are told to demonstrate respect for Śaiva worship. Thus, in the *Śikṣāpatrī*, Sahajānand establishes his lordship over his religious polity, but he also positions it within a wider landscape of intersecting religious authorities.

In another instance of accepting outside influence, Sahajānand also accommodated certain caste norms in the Sampradāy. His preaching generally dismissed any self-importance people derived from their caste status, and he attracted devotees from high- and low-caste backgrounds alike.<sup>65</sup> Some contemporary observers took this caste diversity as a sign of radical change. One British officer, a Mr. Williamson, went so far as to report that Sahajānand had “destroyed the yoke of caste.”<sup>66</sup> However, Sahajānand also upheld caste restrictions in his community, as in his injunction against accepting food from lower-caste people. The *Śikṣāpatrī* told devotees to follow the traditional values and occupations ascribed to their caste. Initially, Sahajānand's renunciants maintained caste distinctions among themselves, eating and living separately, and wearing different colored robes. However, after a period of persecution from other religious groups,

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<sup>65</sup> Williams reports that the early community included devotees from many castes, including “Brahmin, Bhavsar, Charan, Darji, Ghanchi, Gola, Kachhia, Kanbi, Kathi, Koli, Luhar, Mali, Rajput, Salat, Sathwara, Soni, and Suthar castes.” Williams, *Introduction*, 185

<sup>66</sup> Reginald Heber, *Narrative of a Journey through the Upper Provinces of India from Calcutta to Bombay 1824—25* (London: John Murray, 1846) vol. 2, 111, cited in Williams, *Introduction*, 184

Sahajānand ordered his five hundred sādhus to observe even more austere vows. At his direction, they abandoned all caste distinctions and any outward symbols of their status as renunciants: their robes, prayer beads, and their distinctive tuft of hair. These special rules applied only for a few years until British rule was established in Gujarat, putting an end to the Svāminārāyaṇs' persecution. Sahajānand then reinstated traditional caste distinctions among his sādhus.<sup>67</sup> These distinctions are still maintained within the original Svāminārāyaṇ gādis today. Some have argued that Sahajānand's approach was a "strategic accommodation" of caste norms in order to avoid unnecessary social upheaval.<sup>68</sup> This strategic accommodation fits within his general approach to gradual, moderate social change, which attracted British officials to Sahajānand Svāmī. They saw him as an ideal conduit for the kind of steady and predictable Hindu "reform" they sought to affect.

#### *Sahajānand's Colonial Encounters*

Some scholars have characterized Sahajānand Svāmī as a Hindu reformer; however, this framing can skew our understanding of the movement by prioritizing British colonial interests.<sup>69</sup> Shruti Patel's article, "Beyond the Lens of Reform," encourages scholars of the Svāminārāyaṇ movement to consider Sahajānand's work as the creation of a new community rather than a reformation of Hindu traditions.<sup>70</sup> He sought to build a disciplinary community based on an ethic of vairāgya (detachment). Patel situates Sahajānand's emphasis on vairāgya within the harsh, arid environment of western India in his time; famines and droughts were regular occurrences in Gujarat of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>71</sup> Sahajānand pursued vairāgya by building the

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<sup>67</sup> Parekh, *Shri Swami Narayan*, 55—57.

<sup>68</sup> Sadhu Mangalnidhidās, "Sahajanand Swami's Approach to Caste," in Williams and Trivedi, *Swaminarayan Hinduism*, 123.

<sup>69</sup> Prominent portrayals of Sahajānand as reformer appear in Williams, *Introduction*, 2019; and David Pocock, *Mind, Body and Wealth: A Study of Belief and Practice in an Indian Village* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1973).

<sup>70</sup> Shruti Patel, "Beyond the Lens of Reform: Religious Culture in Modern Gujarat," *The Journal of Hindu Studies* 10 (2017): 47—85.

<sup>71</sup> Patel, "Beyond the Lens," 60.

Svāminārāyaṇ ascetic order, with roughly 2,000 sādhus by the end of his life. The sādhus' work was foundational for the growth of the Sampradāy, and their ethic of detachment did not lead to social isolation. Sahajānand instructed the sādhus to live within society and be engaged in social projects. He wanted sādhus to be pravṛtti (active renunciants) instead of nivṛtti (non-acting renunciants), living alone in the wilderness. For Patel, Sahajānand's central program of engaged asceticism is obscured by the historiographical narrative of Hindu reform, which is mainly derived from British accounts. Hatcher likewise critiques reform as the cultural, civilizational teleology that justified British colonization of South Asia and the Protestant Christian logic of liberal progress toward true religion.<sup>72</sup> By disentangling these British interests in Hindu reform from Sahajānand's interest in building the Svāminārāyaṇ community, we can understand where the two intersected and where they diverged.

We can read British sources against the grain of reform to understand how Sahajānand successfully negotiated with encroaching colonial powers in Gujarat. One example occurs when Sir John Malcolm, Governor of the Bombay Presidency, requested a meeting with Sahajānand Svāmī. Their meeting took place on February 28, 1830, just months before Sahajānand passed away on June 1, 1830. British sources explain that Malcolm wanted assurance from Sahajānand that he would support British rule in Gujarat and work against certain practices they abhorred: female infanticide and satī, a wife's self-immolation on her husband's funeral pyre.<sup>73</sup> It appears that regulation of conduct was indeed a topic of discussion between the two. At the meeting, Malcolm received a copy of the *Śikṣāpatrī* from Sahajānand, which is preserved at the Bodleian Library at Oxford. Malcolm took a favorable impression from the meeting, but his narrative of

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<sup>72</sup> Hatcher, *Before Reform*, 13—23.

<sup>73</sup> Makrand Mehta, "Sampradāyik Sāhitya ane Sāmājīk Cetanā: Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāyano Abhyās 1800—1840," *Arthat* 5, no 4. (Oct-Dec 1986): 13.

events still colors the memory of Sahajānand's teaching today. The contemporary Svāminārāyaṇ community and scholarship still describe Sahajānand as an opponent of satī and female infanticide.<sup>74</sup>

However, saying that the two men came to an accord social reform may misconstrue Sahajānand's goals in the meeting with Malcolm. Colonial records indicate that satī was a rare occurrence in Gujarat at the time and far more common in the eastern center of Bengal.<sup>75</sup> Patel argues that opposition to satī was not a central issue in Sahajānand's teaching over the three decades before meeting Governor Malcolm. Further, Patel finds only one instance in the early literature of an attempt by Sahajānand to dissuade local chiefs from practicing female infanticide, which was ultimately unsuccessful. In his account, Sahajānand describes female infanticide as a caste-specific custom of the Rajputs and not a Hindu norm.<sup>76</sup> The early textual sources suggest that Sahajānand recognized reformist concerns when meeting with British officials but not that he implemented them in the discipline of his following. Sahajānand was likely more interested in the strategic benefit of gaining support and respect from other authorities in the region. The Svāminārāyaṇ tradition remembers that, upon Sahajānand's arrival, Malcolm ran outside barefoot to meet him, bowed to him, recognized his divinity, and asked to become his disciple.<sup>77</sup> The memory of Malcolm's admiration for Sahajānand is a further example of his complex agency in Colonial Gujarat. The incident bolsters Sahajānand's divinity when such an eminent outside figure praises him, but it also reaffirms Malcolm's high status in the process.

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<sup>74</sup> Williams, *Introduction*, 31—32; Trivedi, *Bhagwan Swaminarayan*, 196—198.

<sup>75</sup> Williams, *Introduction*, 31.

<sup>76</sup> Patel, "Beyond the Lens," 83—84n67. Hanna Kim's doctoral research into early Svāminārāyaṇ sources likewise found no references to satī or female infanticide: Hanna Kim, "Being Swaminarayan: The Ontology and Significance of Belief in the Construction of a Gujarati Diaspora," PhD diss., (Columbia University, 2001), 290n17.

<sup>77</sup> Viharilaji Maharaj, *Shriharililamrut* 4 vols (Ahmedabad: Swaminarayan Aksharpath, 1997 [1886]), 9.7.1—46, 9.8.6—12, 9.8.58—60, 9.9.1—40, 9.10.1—35, cited in Paramtattvadas and Williams, "British Contacts" in *Swaminarayan Hinduism*, eds. Williams and Trivedi, 72; also Trivedi, *Bhagwan Swaminarayan*, 427.

Sahajānand impressed several British officials by displaying his prowess in both religious discipline and political power during their encounters. The East India Company took control of Ahmedabad on November 30, 1817, and leaders from both the Anglican Church and colonial government began considering their approach to the Kutch and Kathiawar regions to the north and west. Reginald Heber, the Bishop of Calcutta, toured through Gujarat in 1825 and met with Sahajānand in the hopes that “he might be an appointed instrument to prepare the way for the Gospel.”<sup>78</sup> However, Sahajānand defied Heber’s expectations in two respects. The first was in his manner of arrival; Heber wrote, “he came in a somewhat different style from all which I had expected, having with him near two hundred horsemen, mostly well armed with matchlocks and swords, and several of them with coats of mail and spears. Besides them he had a large rabble on foot, with bows and arrows.”<sup>79</sup>

Sahajānand presented his authority as regal and military in addition to his spiritual power. Armed guards also accompanied Bishop Heber, but he noted that the guards protected him because they were ordered to, while Sahajānand’s did so out of their reverence and devotion to him. Sahajānand also surprised Heber in a second sense by declining his invitation to accompany the Bishop’s travel toward Bombay to receive a copy of the Bible transcribed in Devanagari.<sup>80</sup> Heber was disappointed that Sahajānand would not help usher in Protestant Christianity to Gujarat but saw his charisma and disciplinary focus as a force for moral uplift. Like Heber, other Anglican clergy regarded Sahajānand Svāmī as an ally and “reformer” whose influence would benefit Gujarat and the Church’s work, in turn.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Reginald Heber, *Narrative of a Journey through the Upper Provinces of India from Calcutta to Bombay 1824—25* (London: John Murray, 1828), cited in Pocock, *Mind, Body and Wealth*, 132.

<sup>79</sup> Heber, *Narrative*, cited in Pocock, *Mind, Body and Wealth*, 133.

<sup>80</sup> Pocock, *Mind, Body and Wealth*, 134.

<sup>81</sup> Reverend William Hodge Mill also wrote positively of the Svāminārāyaṇ community, noting signs of “favorable change” and hoping Sahajānand would be a “clear & useful handmaid to Christianity,” cited in Hatcher, *Before*

The colonial government's approach to Sahajānand mirrored its overall strategy of indirect rule in Gujarat. Governor Malcolm ultimately recommended against expanding direct rule into Kutch and Kathiawar. In 1830, he wrote a "Minute on Visiting Cutch" explaining the difficulty of securing the Gulf of Kutch, which was vulnerable to both the "Ameers of Scind" to the north as well as "pirates and plunderers" from the coast.<sup>82</sup> As Purohit explains, the territory offered no significant agricultural or industrial benefit to the British government. The cost of deploying troops was too great a financial drain to justify the expansion.<sup>83</sup> Instead, Malcolm concluded, "[t]his small country should be managed by natives under the supervision of a Resident."<sup>84</sup> This Residency system, or indirect rule, established alliances with local rulers that created the princely states in India, a strategy that was later adopted around the colonial world. Malcolm chose his alliances based, in part, on his assessment of the ruler's character and disposition toward social reform. For example, he selected the Rao of Kutch to lead the region instead of the Jadeja caste of Rajputs because they practiced female infanticide and appeared lazy and rude to him.<sup>85</sup> In this way, the system of indirect rule was both an economic solution for British territorial expansion and a means to promote their social and religious reform.

British officials likewise favored Sahajānand's morality and put an end to the earlier persecution of the Svāminārāyaṇs in Ahmedabad. Early Svāminārāyaṇ texts record several meetings between Sahajānand and an official called "Eron Sahib," who assured him, "Now that the Company is in power, you may freely preach in the city at your will; no one will harass you.

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*Reform*, 204—205. Another clergyman, Thomas Williamson, recommended that Bishop Heber meet with Sahajānand, emphasizing his high standards of morality and teaching of monotheism, cited in Hatcher, *Before Reform*, 206.

<sup>82</sup> John Malcolm, "Minute on Visiting Cutch" in "Copies of Minutes of Major-Gen Sir John Malcolm, Gov. of Bombay 1823—1830, 23 April 1829—15 October 1830," (Lithograph, British Library), 162, 174, cited in Purohit, *Aga Khan*, 95.

<sup>83</sup> Purohit, *Aga Khan*, 95—96.

<sup>84</sup> Malcolm, "Minute," 175, cited in Purohit, *Aga Khan*, 96.

<sup>85</sup> Purohit, *Aga Khan*, 97—98.

In fact, your harassers are themselves in great distress now.”<sup>86</sup> Here, the official refers to the previous Marathi rulers of Ahmedabad who had banned Sahajānand from preaching or performing rituals in the city. Eron Sahib conveyed the Company’s belief that Sahajānand was a righteous teacher and promised that he and his followers would be protected under their rule. Eron Sahib’s exact identity is still uncertain, but he may have been a British official named Edward Ironside.<sup>87</sup> Whoever he was, Eron Sahib served under John Andrew Dunlop, who was the first Collector of Ahmedabad, beginning in February of 1818.

John Dunlop formalized British support for Sahajānand Svāmī by granting him a plot of land in the Kalupur area of Ahmedabad, where he built his first temple, called the Nar-Narayan temple. The temple was consecrated on February 24, 1822, as Dunlop mentioned in a Memorandum in the *Asiatic Journal* published the following year: “a multitude of 50,000 people [were] stated to accompany him [Sahajānand] on a recent visit to Ahmedabad, for the purpose of consecrating a temple to Nir Narain [Nar-Narayan].”<sup>88</sup> After completing his first temple in Ahmedabad, Sahajānand Svāmī spent the rest of the 1820s building five other temples around Gujarat in Bhuj, Vadtal, Junagadh, Dholera, and Gadhada. Sahajānand Svāmī won the favor of British officials negotiating the indirect rule of Gujarat, which allowed the Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy to establish its foundational temples across the region.

### *Sahajānand’s Devotional Formations*

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<sup>86</sup> Hariprakash Shastri and Gnanprakash Shastri, Gujarati trans., *Shriharicharitamrutsagar* of Adharanand Swami, 5 vols. (Gandhinagar: Shri Swaminarayan Sahitya Prakashan Mandir, 1995), 17.74, cited in Paramtattvadas and Williams, “British Contacts,” in Williams and Trivedi, *Swaminarayan Hinduism*, 69.

<sup>87</sup> Williams, *Introduction*, 20.

<sup>88</sup> Paramtattvadas and Williams have argued that Dunlop is most likely the author of this section of the memorandum. “Indian Sect: Memorandum Respecting a Sect Lately Introduced by a Person Calling Himself Swamee Naraen,” *The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register for British India and Its Dependencies*, XV (1823): 348—9, cited in Paramtattvadas and Williams, “British Contacts” in Williams and Trivedi, *Swaminarayan Hinduism*, 68.

Even as Sahajānand formalized his religious institution, Svāminārāyaṇ devotional life enmeshed the Sampradāy within the messy and rhizomatic network of bhakti. North Indian bhakti communities, including the Svāminārāyaṇs, often trace their roots back to the Vedānta philosophers like Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja. However, this official lineage can obscure historical influences from other sources, such as Sufi Islam and the Mughal empire. Following scholars who frame bhakti as a network rather than a movement, this final section analyzes how multiple traditions of devotion impacted Sahajānand’s movement. His devotional aesthetics and practices were full of ambiguities and equations with other religious traditions. Instead of diminishing Sahajānand’s influence, I argue, these ambiguities did more to empower Svāminārāyaṇ bhakti, filling it with referents to pre-existing devotional experiences and quickly assembling a tradition from the fragments of others. Here, I complement Hatcher’s notion of Sahajānand’s “complex agency” with Anand Pandian’s understanding of tradition as “mosaic.” What emerges is an eclectic Svāminārāyaṇ formation that—in addition to its Vedānta influence—is layered with historical forms of devotion from the Mughal empire, Kṛṣṇa-bhakti traditions, and the Vallabha Sampradāy. The authority of ācāryas and gurus in the Svāminārāyaṇ tradition draws from the practices of Sufi Pirs and of Emperor Akbar. Sahajānand’s divinity was visualized by aesthetically blurring distinctions between himself and Kṛṣṇa, and the Sampradāy established its institution by borrowing practices from the Vallabha Sampradāy. These ambiguities also led to schism for the group that became BAPS, claiming to reform the Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy in 1906.

The idea of the bhakti movement is a master narrative of popular Indian religion that unites a diverse set of communities and poetic traditions. However, bhakti can be more accurately characterized as a network instead of a movement. Bhakti, the people’s religion of heartfelt devotion, is found in every part of India, in every major language, inspiring poetry and songs from

the sixth to the sixteenth century, which are still recited today. As the narrative of bhakti is often told, the movement began in the far south and moved up the west coast, through Maharashtra and Gujarat, to the Hindi- and Urdu-speaking North and Bengal in the East. The crucial connections that transferred bhakti from South India to North, in this story, were the “four sampradāys” founded by four southern ācāryas, some of whom we have met before: Rāmānuja, Viṣṇuswāmī, Nimbārka, and Madhva.

John Hawley has historicized the concept of the four sampradāys, arguing their importance first emerged in the Mughal Empire and only solidified in the twentieth century. Literary historians Hazariprasad Dwivedi and Kshitimohan Sen were the key proponents of the four sampradāy theory as a way to unify the Hindu literature of the Indian nation.<sup>89</sup> As Dwivedi wrote in 1940, “simply put, the Vaishnava philosophies of the south provided the basic inspiration for the bhakti movement.”<sup>90</sup> Moreover, he rejected the idea that Islam had any significant influence upon bhakti. In contrast to this notion of a unified, Hindu-contained bhakti movement, Hawley suggests the productive re-framing of bhakti as a network. The bhakti network does not move unidirectionally but rather back and forth, through overlapping communities, with influence from multiple religious traditions.<sup>91</sup> The idea of the bhakti network is especially helpful for understanding the role of Islam in shaping the culture of bhakti, particularly in North India.

The North Indian bhakti of today took shape under the Mughal Empire, especially during the reign of Akbar (1556—1605). Akbar the Great’s conquest of present-day Rajasthan and Gujarat ushered in new religious policies and political alliances that facilitated the rise of Vaiṣṇava

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<sup>89</sup> John Stratton Hawley, *A Storm of Songs: India and the Idea of the Bhakti Movement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 100.

<sup>90</sup> Hazariprasad Dwivedi, *Hindī Sāhitya kī Bhūmikā* (New Delhi: Rājkamal Prakāśan, 1991 [1940]), cited in Hawley, *Storm of Songs*, 103.

<sup>91</sup> Hawley, *Storm of Songs*, 296.

bhakti in the region. Akbar formed an important alliance with Hindu Rajputs of the Kaccvāhā lineage, which brought Hindus into the Mughal court and privileged their form of Vaiṣṇava bhakti.<sup>92</sup> The rise of Vaiṣṇava devotion in Gujarat coincided with a fall in the popularity of Śaiva devotion.<sup>93</sup> Akbar’s imperial authority also had an elective affinity with the worship of a supreme brahman who reigns over the universe of māyā, as described in Rāmānuja’s writing. Vaiṣṇava bhakti fit within the new ideology of Mughal rule, as Kumkum Chatterjee argued, “[t]he intensely personal, unquestioning bhakti that underlay the phenomenon of Vaishnava devotion in northern India during this period, constituted a parallel, at least at the conceptual level, with the cult of devoted imperial service and devotion.”<sup>94</sup> In his lifetime, Akbar was often equated with forms of Viṣṇu, especially Rāma, the idealized Hindu king. Akbar ordered the first complete Persian translation of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in the 1580s.<sup>95</sup> Thus in several ways—Rajput alliances, imperial devotional values, and his affinity for Rāma—Akbar promoted Vaiṣṇava bhakti during his rule, and Vaiṣṇava institutions flourished as a result.

Sufism and bhakti were both influenced by the same conditions of the Mughal period, and they formed common opinions of an individual’s proper devotional relation to God. Scholars have argued that bhakti’s self-denying, God-loving attitudes bore most in common with Sufis, and that both groups counterposed themselves against the prideful, occult powers of tāntras, yogīs, and śaktas.<sup>96</sup> These distinctions were often narrativized in hagiographic accounts of miracle battles.

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<sup>92</sup> Patton Burchett, *A Genealogy of Devotion: Bhakti, Tantra, Yoga, and Sufism in North India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 116—117.

<sup>93</sup> Samira Sheikh, *Forging a Region: Sultans, Traders, and Pilgrims in Gujarat, 1200—1500* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 135.

<sup>94</sup> Kumkum Chatterjee, “Cultural Flows and Cosmopolitanism in Mughal India: The Bishnupur Kingdom,” *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 24, no. 2 (2009): 157—158, cited in Burchett, *Genealogy of Devotion*, 112—113.

<sup>95</sup> Burchett, *Genealogy of Devotion*, 113—114.

<sup>96</sup> For example, Heidi Pauwels, “Who Are the Enemies of the Bhaktas? Testimony about “śaktas” and “Others” from Kabīr, the Rāmānandīs, Tulsīdās, and Harirām Vyās,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 130, no. 4 (2010): 509—539.

Patton Burchett cites one early account of a miracle battle between a yogī, who achieved his powers by performing austerities to acquire tapas, and a Sufī saint, who turned to God in a time of need. When the yogī challenged the Sufi to a contest of spiritual powers, he first demonstrated his ability to levitate, rising to touch the ceiling, and then return to the floor, all while holding a single pose. In response, the Sufi prayed for God to grant him such powers, and he flew up above the building, toward the qibla, then north and south, before landing again.<sup>97</sup> The yogī conceded that the Sufi’s power was true and superior because God bestowed it. In contrast, his power was false and inferior because he created it through quasi-magical, personal austerities. Burchett demonstrates how later bhakti narratives in Marathi, Hindi, and Punjabi deploy precisely the same tropes: the supernatural powers of a greedy yogī are trumped by miracles that God grants to a humble devotee.<sup>98</sup> This multi-traditional genealogy of devotion demonstrates precisely what is gained by conceiving bhakti as a network; North Indian bhakti often has stronger connections with Sufi Islam than other Hindu communities.

The North Indian Vaiṣṇava bhakti world that Sahajānand entered in the late-eighteenth century still fostered this Sufi-inflected bhakti sensibility. Miracle battles like the above Sufi-yogī conflict are also found in hagiographies of Sahajānand Svāmī. As described above, during his adolescent travels in Bengal, Nīlkaṇṭh counteracted the prideful spells of tāntrikas to backfire on their casters. Through his piety and prayer to God, the young Nīlkaṇṭh was saved and allowed to triumph over the magic of tāntra. Later in the *Vacanāmrt*, Sahajānand often preached against tāntra and śakti as false, arrogant religious paths. In this way, the Svāminārāyaṇ literature heralds the “one-pointed, passionate, ego-dissolving love for God,” that Burchett argues arose in the sixteenth

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<sup>97</sup> Burchett, *Genealogy of Devotion*, 292.

<sup>98</sup> Burchett, *Genealogy of Devotion*, 295—303.

and seventeenth centuries as “a new and Sufi-inflected *bhakti* sensibility that defined itself especially against the “other” of the tantric yogī.”<sup>99</sup> These brief comparisons point to a wider historical context of inter-traditional exchange and mutual-imbrication of *bhakti* and Sufi communities from the Mughal period onward.

This Sufi-*bhakti* commonality also helps explain Sahajānand Svāmī’s Muslim devotees and admirers, whose stories validate his divinity in the Sampradāy. During his lifetime and through much of Svāminārāyaṇ history, there are stories of Muslims who worship Sahajānand, some who retain the Muslim identity, and others who leave Islam for the Sampradāy. In one example, the Pathan of Delhi is said to have met Sahajānand while traveling to Junagadh. During their conversation, Sahajānand put him into a state of samādhi. The Pathan was granted a vision of Allah and praised Sahajānand when he emerged from the samādhi. The upshot of the Pathan’s story, as told in the later Sampradāy, is that Muslims also recognized that Sahajānand had a genuine relation to divinity.

Other stories go further, like that of one Sheikh Valibhai, who became a devotee of Sahajānand and left Islam to become a member of the Sampradāy. The Sheikh’s village ostracized him, and he lived the life of an outcast for years. Still, we are told, his faith in Svāminārāyaṇ never wavered, and he remained a devotee until the end of his life. At the time of his death, Bhagvān Svāminārāyaṇ rewarded his faith by descending from the sky in a heavenly chariot, inviting Valibhai to join him, and taking off toward Akṣardhām, for all the village to see.<sup>100</sup> Sheikh Valibhai’s story teaches that Muslim devotees may face resistance from their community, but they will ultimately be justified for their love of Sahajānand. Muslim devotees in the early Sampradāy

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<sup>99</sup> Burchett, *Genealogy of Devotion*, 276.

<sup>100</sup> These two stories are illustrated and narrated in the art gallery of the Gñān Bāg complex in Vadtal, Gujarat, viewed on May 31, 2018. Thanks to Kanji Bhagat and Lalji Bhagat for granting me access and to Manoj Patel for the guided tour.

show another node of Muslim-bhakti networks in Gujarat, and their stories serve to buttress Sahajānand's divinity with observers situated in different religious traditions.

Sahajānand also attracted a number of followers from Sufi and Ismaili Muslim communities. As mentioned before, the Satpanth community in Pirana claims that Sahajānand was initiated into their ascetic order before he took Rāmānanda Swami as his guru. Svāminārāyaṇ followers reject this story, and hagiographies offer a narrative reversal of the Svāminārāyaṇ-Satpanth connection. Sahajānand is said to have visited the ashram of the "Pirana Panth," described as "an Ismaili Sufi group founded by Imam Shah."<sup>101</sup> There, Sahajānand took a seat on the chair of Imam Shah, which was traditionally left empty. The resident Sufi Pir took Sahajānand's behavior as a sign that he was divine. The Pir asked to become a Svāminārāyaṇ sādhu, so Sahajānand immediately initiated him and gave him saffron robes. Afterward, members of the Pirana community protested that their following could not survive without a Pir. Sahajānand sympathized with the people and asked the Pir to return his robes and remain at the ashram. However, he also taught the Pir to chant the "Svāminārāyaṇ" mantra and vowed to take him to Akṣardhām after his death.<sup>102</sup> This version of the story makes Sahajānand into a symbolic leader of the Pirana Panth instead of a disciple. By briefly initiating the Pir and giving him the Svāminārāyaṇ mantra, Sahajānand becomes the unofficial spiritual guide of this Satpanth leader and exerts his influence over the wider community. Sahajānand's complex agency accommodated outside influences within his following and extended his authority into the communities of others. While Svāminārāyaṇs and Satpanthis disagree on the nature of Sahajānand's affiliation, fragments of each community remain within the other.

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<sup>101</sup> Trivedi, *Bhagwan Swaminarayan*, 219—220.

<sup>102</sup> Trivedi, *Bhagwan Swaminarayan*, 220.

Sahajānand’s work with multiple religious communities can help us rethink the role of religious fragments in the formation of new traditions. Sahajānand Svāmī explicitly situated himself within the tradition of Kṛṣṇa bhakti, but his relationship to Kṛṣṇa was still ambiguous and multifaceted. Throughout his life, Sahajānand drew on aspects of Kṛṣṇa bhakti to describe himself variably as 1) a devotee of Kṛṣṇa, as 2) equivalent to Kṛṣṇa, and as 3) superior to Kṛṣṇa. Here, I suggest that his ambiguous relationship with Kṛṣṇa enlivened the Svāminārāyaṇ tradition instead of confusing or crippling it. Kṛṣṇa bhakti was prevalent in Gujarat in his time, popularized from the fifteenth century onward, by poets like Mirabai and Narasinha Mehta<sup>103</sup> and institutionalized in the Vallabha and Nimbārka Sampradāys. Sahajānand welcomed Gujarati devotees to import their previous experiences with Kṛṣṇa into the Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy, a vitalizing interplay of devotional fragments.

Sahajānand institutionalized the worship of Kṛṣṇa through his discourses, his instructions for devotees, the early Sampradāy’s poetry, and temple mūrtis. Early in his leadership of the Sampradāy, Sahajānand taught that Kṛṣṇa was the supreme God (parabrahman) and described himself as a humble devotee.<sup>104</sup> Sahajānand often said in the *Vacanāmṛt* that Kṛṣṇa was the greatest of all the avatāras and that worshipping Kṛṣṇa led to liberation.<sup>105</sup> In the 108<sup>th</sup> verse of the *Śikṣāpatrī*, he instructs devotees to worship Śrī Kṛṣṇa as their iṣṭadeva (their chosen and cherished deity).<sup>106</sup> Kṛṣṇa also featured prominently in the Sampradāy’s early literature, especially that of the great

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<sup>103</sup> Neelima Shukla-Bhatt, *Narasinha Mehta of Gujarat: A Legacy of Bhakti in Songs and Stories* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>104</sup> Williams, *Introduction*, 80.

<sup>105</sup> For example, in the *Vacanāmṛt*, Pancālā 6, he explains that Kṛṣṇa is the most powerful and supreme avtār; BAPS sadhus, *Vachanāmṛt*, 393—395. Also in *Vacanāmṛt*, Loyā 14, he says, “I have a million-fold more affection for the avatar of Shri Kṛṣṇa. I feel, ‘This avatar is greater and more powerful than all of the others.’” BAPS sadhus, *Vachanāmṛt*, 341.

<sup>106</sup> *The Digital Shikshapatri*, verse 108, via Archive.org, accessed May 11, 2021, [https://wayback.archive-it.org/org-467/20191016133933/http://www.shikshapatri.org.uk/~imagedb/hms/mss\\_browse.php?expand=638,639&act=chunit&unit=108](https://wayback.archive-it.org/org-467/20191016133933/http://www.shikshapatri.org.uk/~imagedb/hms/mss_browse.php?expand=638,639&act=chunit&unit=108).

Svāminārāyaṇ poet, Svāmī Premānand. Premānand’s work is compiled in the *Premānanda Kāvya*. Yogi Trivedi gives the illustrative numerical example that, of the 3,375 poems in the *Kāvya*, roughly 1,800 discuss Kṛṣṇa, while only 765 explicitly mention Sahajānand or Svāminārāyaṇ.<sup>107</sup> Kṛṣṇa was also prominent in the Sampradāy’s early iconography. Sahajānand installed mūrtis of Kṛṣṇa in all of the six temples constructed during his life. At his first temple in Ahmedabad, Sahajānand installed the image of Nar-Narayan, or Kṛṣṇa with Arjuna, in the central shrine. Thus, in many ways, Sahajānand fashioned himself as a devotee of Kṛṣṇa and directed his followers to do the same.

At other points, however, Svāminārāyaṇ hagiographies and temple murtis present Sahajānand as an equivalent manifestation of Kṛṣṇa. Hagiographic narratives of Sahajānand’s childhood in Chhapaiya mirror Kṛṣṇa’s childhood stories in the *Śrīmad Bhagavatam*. In both accounts, before their births, Svāminārāyaṇ and Kṛṣṇa appear to their parents in dreams, announcing that God will manifest on Earth in order to save it.<sup>108</sup> Demonic figures also came to kill both Ghaṅṣyām and Kṛṣṇa as newborns, but both babies used their superhuman strength to kill their assailants. Further, when installing images of Kṛṣṇa in his temples, Sahajānand typically presented him in pairs: Kṛṣṇa with Rādhā, or Kṛṣṇa with Arjuna. Eventually, at the Vadtal temple in 1824, Sahajānand also consecrated an image of himself, which is called Harikṛṣṇa, alongside images of Kṛṣṇa with Rādhā. As Cynthia Packert notes, “this visual pairing is emblematic of a very complex and uniquely Svāminārāyaṇ refashioning of the bhakti relationship between divine God and the human devotee that implicitly includes the presence of Svāminārāyaṇ himself as

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<sup>107</sup> Yogi Trivedi, “Multivalent Kṛṣṇa-bhakti in Premanand’s Poetry,” in Williams and Trivedi, *Swaminarayan Hinduism*, 199.

<sup>108</sup> Several scholars have noted his childhood connections with Kṛṣṇa: Kim, “Being Swaminarayan,” 285; Williams, *Introduction*, 84–85; Cynthia Packert, “From Gujarat to the Globe: ‘Bhakti Visuality’ and Identity in BAPS Svāminārāyaṇ Hinduism,” *The Journal of Hindu Studies* 12 (2019): 197.

object of worship.”<sup>109</sup> The visual pairing both represents the relationship of the devotee with God and blurs the distinction between Sahajānand Svāmī and Kṛṣṇa. The result of this hagiographic and iconographic blurring is that many of Sahajānand’s later followers understand that whenever he mentioned Kṛṣṇa, he was actually speaking about himself.<sup>110</sup>

Finally, later in his life, Sahajānand taught that he was the manifestation of parabrahman, or puruṣottam, the supreme God and sender of all other avatāras, including Kṛṣṇa. Sahajānand hinted at this position in the *Vacanāmṛt* but was slow to reveal his full divine status, according to tradition, because the early Sampradāy was not yet ready to accept this teaching. As the Sampradāy developed, the understanding of Sahajānand as parabrahman became the predominant theological position. Sahajānand is thus understood to be a higher order of being than avatāras like Kṛṣṇa and Rāma, who are īśvaras. Parabrahman is the ultimate, unparalleled master of the material universe, māyā, and free from its sway. By contrast, īśvaras are bound within the māyik universe, have limited knowledge, and receive their powers from parabrahman. In this official theological sense, Kṛṣṇa is diminished and becomes subservient to Sahajānand.

However, the devotional fragments that praise Kṛṣṇa as supreme persist within the Sampradāy. Svāminārāyaṇ devotees still sing Premānand’s songs to Kṛṣṇa. Sādhus still perform ārtī veneration before Kṛṣṇa’s paired sacred images in Svāminārāyaṇ temples, and devotees still take darśan of them every day. Svāminārāyaṇ bookstalls sell books with the childhood stories of Ghaṅṣyām as well as those of Kṛṣṇa. Practices originating in distinct theological positions are not fully reconciled but nevertheless coexist in the tradition’s iconography, literature, and music. Multiple understandings of Kṛṣṇa remain alongside one another in the mosaic of the Svāminārāyaṇ

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<sup>109</sup> Cynthia Packert, “Early Swaminarayan Iconography and Its Relationship to Vaishnavism,” in Williams and Trivedi, *Swaminarayan Hinduism*, 253.

<sup>110</sup> Kim, “Being Swaminarayan,” 321.

Sampradāy, and devotees variably draw on these sources to create their devotional meaning. The interplay of devotional fragments has given life to Svāminārāyaṇ bhakti both historically, as understandings of Sahajānand’s divinity evolved over the course of his life, and today, as practitioners continue to blend their experiences of Kṛṣṇa bhakti with Svāminārāyaṇ bhakti.

Sahajānand Svāmī further incorporated Kṛṣṇa bhakti into his Sampradāy by presenting it as a legitimate, adjacent alternative to the prominent Vallabha Sampradāy, also called the Puṣṭimārga (Path of Grace). Scholars continue to debate the age-old question of Sahajānand’s relation to the Vallabhas. Monier-Williams was among the first academics to portray Sahajānand as a “puritan” reformer correcting the Vallabha Sampradāy’s degradation and “utter confusion of the Vaishnava faith.”<sup>111</sup> In the twentieth century, Makrand Mehta and François Mallison likewise pointed to cases of the Vallabha Ācārya’s corruption as the impetus for Sahajānand’s strict codes of conduct.<sup>112</sup> The trouble with some of these accounts is that they often point to the Maharaj Libel Case in 1862, thirty-two years after Sahajānand’s death. More recently, Shruti Patel has pushed against this characterization, arguing that “there is no known contention between the two communities in Sahajānand Svāmī’s lifetime.”<sup>113</sup> On the contrary, as mentioned above, Sahajānand even adopted some Vallabha customs, writing in the *Śikṣāpatrī* that his devotees should follow the patterns of temple worship, fasting, and festival celebration set by Viṭṭhalnāth, the son of Vallabhācārya. Patel’s revision helps correct this anachronistic narrative of reform and recognizes those Vallabha fragments that entered the Svāminārāyaṇ tradition.

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<sup>111</sup> Monier Monier-Williams, *Hinduism* (Calcutta: Susil Gupta, 1951 [1877]), 101—102, cited in Williams, *Introduction*, 30.

<sup>112</sup> Makrand Mehta, “Maharaj Libel Case: A Study in Social Change in Western India in the Nineteenth Century,” *Indo-Asian Culture* 19 (1970): 26—39; François Mallison, “La Secte Krichnaïte des Swami-narayani au Gujarat,” *Journal Asiatic* 262, no. 3-4 (1974): 437—471.

<sup>113</sup> Patel, “Beyond the Lens,” 52.

However, there was at least one instance of contention between the two communities in the mid-nineteenth century. Arun Brahmhatt's work analyzes the *Śri Hari Dig Vijaya*, an early Svāminārāyaṇ text describing debates with other religious communities and philosophical schools. At one point in the text, Sahajānand and his sādhus debate a Vallabha Gosvāmī, challenging his Śuddhādvaita system of Vedānta and accusing him of misconduct with the wives of his disciples. Brahmhatt argues this is a clear example of early Svāminārāyaṇs critiquing the Vallabha Sampradāy but adds that it is "all in the service of establishing the śāstriyatā, or scholastic rigor, of the Swaminarayan tradition."<sup>114</sup> Brahmhatt's convincing exegesis helps us arrive at a more nuanced understanding of relations between the nascent Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy and the established Vallabha Sampradāy. While it is true that academic accounts have overblown the nineteenth-century antagonism between the two, Sahajānand was intent upon legitimating his young Sampradāy and differentiating it from the Vallabha Sampradāy, which involved a certain amount of critique.

#### *BAPS Departs from Vadtal*

In the early-twentieth century, the Akshar Purushottam group's split from the Vadtal Gadi established an additional narrative of sectarian reform within the Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy. Sadhu Yagnapurshdas (later called Shastriji Maharaj) left the Vadtal Gadi in 1906 due to theological differences, described above, and disputes over proper codes of conduct for Svāminārāyaṇ leaders. Shastriji accused sādhus in the Vadtal Gadi of violating the ascetic vows established by Shajānand. Vadtal sādhus were said to have contact and conversations with women and some were said to be accumulating wealth. Shastriji also found fault in the administration and morality of the current Vadtal Ācārya, Lakshmi Prasad Pande, and sought to a more righteous form of Svāminārāyaṇ

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<sup>114</sup> Brahmhatt, "Scholastic Publics," 57.

leadership. Shastriji was not alone in his criticism of Lakshmi Prasad; soon after his departure, the Ācārya was deposed for failing to uphold the requirements of his office.<sup>115</sup> Within BAPS, the 1906 schism is remembered as a reform of the Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy, casting off the immorality and corruption of the Vadtal Gadi and reinstating the proper moral and ritual observances prescribed by Sahajānand Svāmī.<sup>116</sup> Over the twentieth century, BAPS was often portrayed as the reformation movement within the Sampradāy, as in a 1943 court decision that deemed BAPS the “Protestant church” in relation to the “Catholic” Vadtal Gadi (see Chapter 2).

However, the changes instituted by Shastriji Maharaj can be more aptly described as an empowerment of ascetics than a reformation of the Sampradāy. Shastriji raised the devotional status of ascetic gurus to the point that Akshar Purushottam members take them as an object of worship. In 1906, members of the Vadtal Gadi feared that Shastriji would place a mūrti of the sādhu Guṇātītānand Svāmī alongside the temple’s mūrti of Svāminārāyaṇ, and they quickly called for a meeting that led to his formal expulsion from the Gadi.<sup>117</sup> Six sādhus defected from the Vadtal Gadi along with Shastriji Maharaj and established the Akshar Purushottam institution that would come to be known as BAPS. His Akṣar Puruṣottam theology created a dual devotional focus, both on God and his perfect devotee, the brahmasvarūpa guru. Similar to how Sahajānand blurred aesthetic distinctions between himself and Kṛṣṇa, Shastriji incorporated the BAPS guru lineage alongside mūrtis of Bhagvān Svāminārāyaṇ. BAPS now installs images of the brahmasvarūpa gurus—all but one of whom are ascetics—in temples as mūrtis that are worshiped through darśan

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<sup>115</sup> Raymond Brady Williams, *A new face of Hinduism: the Swaminarayan religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 44—45.

<sup>116</sup> Hanna Kim, “Being Swaminarayan,” 75—76.

<sup>117</sup> Williams, *Introduction*, 60—61. A 1943 court decision later found that the Vadtal Gadi’s decision to expel Shastriji was hastily and improperly carried out. Therefore, the judge opined, his expulsion was illegitimate and Shastriji could still be considered a member of Vadtal. However, by the 1940s, the split between Vadtal and BAPS was solidified and effectively irreversible (see Chapter 2). Shastri Shri Yagnapurushdasji v. Acharya Shri Anandprasadji Maharaj, Appeal no. 165 (Kaira District, at Nadiad, 1943).

and ārtī.<sup>118</sup> Shastriji interpreted ambiguities in Sahajānand’s devotional practices to extend his divine presence through the BAPS guru lineage.

The Akshar Purushottam group also empowered its ascetic leadership with a new form of authority based on the guru’s status as the “perfect devotee” of Svāminārāyaṇ. Shastriji taught that sādhus possessed the spiritual authority to initiate new sādhus into the Sampradāy and install mūrtis in Svāminārāyaṇ temples. The original gādis reject this teaching and maintain that only the Ācāryas wield this spiritual authority, which they inherit as descendants of Sahajānand’s family. They cite the fact that these responsibilities were delegated to the Ācāryas in the *Śikṣāpatrī*, written by Sahajānand Svāmī himself. In contrast, BAPS followers point to Sahajānand’s teachings in the *Vacanāmṛt* that stress the centrality of a true guru and his core mission of establishing an order of Svāminārāyaṇ ascetics. Instead of the Ācārya’s inherited authority, the BAPS guru’s authority derives from their divine qualities and ascetic rigor that aligns with the spirit of Sahajānand’s original following. These debates notwithstanding, on both of these major issues, Shastriji’s teaching enhanced the authority of sādhus to have full administrative and spiritual control over the new Svāminārāyaṇ faction.

Consequently, the Akshar Purushottam group altered the status of the *Śikṣāpatrī*, which Sahajānand said was his form embodied in words. For all of the publishing that BAPS undertakes, the organization never published a full edition of the *Śikṣāpatrī*. Instead, they published edited, pared down versions, called *Gems From Shikshapatri* or *Śikṣāpatrīnā Ājñāvacano*.<sup>119</sup> Crucially, these versions exclude the verses in which Sahajānand enthrones the two Ācāryas to the original

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<sup>118</sup> There is one figure in the lineage, called Pragji Bhakta (1829—1897), who was a house-holding Svāminārāyaṇ devotee. He is the figure who connects Shastriji Maharaj to Guṇātītānand Svāmī. After Pragji Bhakta, however, all of the BAPS brahmasvarūpa gurus are ascetic sādhus.

<sup>119</sup> *Gems From Shikshapatri*, trans. Sadhu Vivekjiandas and Sadhu Amrutvijaydas (Ahmedabad: Swaminarayan Aksharpith, 2010); *Śikṣāpatrīnā Ājñāvacano*, BAPS Sadhus (Ahmedabad: Swaminarayan Aksharpith, 2010).

gādis, instructs devotees to honor and support them, and appoints their wives as leaders of female devotees.<sup>120</sup> BAPS claims their versions convey the essence of the *Śikṣāpatrī*, but their edits serve to further undermine, even erase, the Ācāryas' authority. Sahajānand enjoined devotees to read, listen to, or worship the *Śikṣāpatrī* every day, but this practice also appears to have diminished in the contemporary BAPS. During fieldwork in India and the US, I asked BAPS devotees to describe their daily worship rituals. Of the thirty interviews in which I asked this question, only five devotees reported reading the *Śikṣāpatrī* regularly. By contrast, all thirty devotees reported that they worshiped images of the BAPS gurus daily. This is another way in which the guru's divine presence has supplanted the Ācārya's and the *Śikṣāpatrī*'s divinity in the lives of BAPS devotees.

Sahajānand exercised a complex agency, to use Hatcher's term, when he fashioned himself as his Sampradāy's ācārya and God while nevertheless allowing for the influence of other Gods and ācāryas. He critiqued the Vallabha teaching of Śuddhādvaita and distinguished his own following by aligning with Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita. At the same time, his *Śikṣāpatrī* honored Viṭṭhalnāth and adopted some of his customs. Sahajānand had a similarly complex relationship with Kṛṣṇa bhakti in general, hinting that he was superior to Kṛṣṇa but still instructing devotees to worship him and sing his devotional songs. Sahajānand maintained Sufi-inflected forms of devotion to demonstrate his divine nature, which attracted some Muslim followers to convert outright and others to recognize his divinity from afar. The devotional Sampradāy that Sahajānand formed is another cluster of nodes in the network of north Indian bhakti. Later communities, like BAPS, were able to reinterpret his teaching through the ambiguous and multivalent connections with other bhakti traditions. Still, Sahajānand was the central conduit through which devotional

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<sup>120</sup> *The Digital Shikshapatri*, verses 3, 62, 71—72, 123—134, via Archive.org, accessed July 7, 2021, [https://wayback.archive-it.org/org-467/20191016131425/http://www.shikshapatri.org.uk/~imagedb/hms/mss\\_browse.php?expand=638,639&act=chunit&unit=3](https://wayback.archive-it.org/org-467/20191016131425/http://www.shikshapatri.org.uk/~imagedb/hms/mss_browse.php?expand=638,639&act=chunit&unit=3).

songs, images, rituals, and people entered the Sampradāy. As such, he remains a relevant figure for many other tangential communities in the Gujarati bhakti network and the crucial connective tissue for those who call themselves Svāminārāyaṇ.

*Conclusion: Sahajānand's Formation*

Sahajānand's complex agency within his South Asian religious milieu made the Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy into a mosaic tradition. Within the Sampradāy, hagiographies paint Sahajānand Svāmī as a singular and original religious visionary. However, this characterization can obscure much of what this chapter has explored: his participation in wider cultural mores and his embrace of outside religious influences. Sahajānand claimed the theological position of Viśiṣṭādvaita to define his movement in relation to other Vedānta communities and gain standing within Sanskritic scholastic publics. His personal origin story follows familiar tropes of ascetic virtuosos, and as Nīlkaṇṭh Varṇī, he followed the same pilgrimage circuits traveled by many South Asian religious seekers. In Gujarat, he codified membership in his Sampradāy by prescribing behavioral norms, some of which were shared by the Satpanth community and the Vallabha Sampradāy. He negotiated British interests in reform to gain protection and land for his first temples. Finally, Sahajānand blended Svāminārāyaṇ literature and iconography with Sufi-inflected devotion and Kṛṣṇa bhakti. Fragments from all these sources enriched the early Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy by layering multiple devotional meanings onto its new religious forms.

This understanding of a mosaic Svāminārāyaṇ tradition does not depend upon an unbroken chain of connection to the deep philosophical past of Vedānta. Rather, thinking with Anand Pandian, I argue this tradition was assembled with inherited forms from scattered cultural sources in a novel combination. As the bricoleur behind this bricolage, Sahajānand himself became the devotional standard by which all Svāminārāyaṇs measure their lives as devotees. His rules give definitive answers to certain behavioral questions, although his overall life and teaching are still

shot through with ambiguities and layered meanings. The incongruencies of Sahajānand's different fragments make fodder for the endless performance of kathās, spiritual discourses, that conduct communal reflection on devotional questions even today. Some organizations within the Svāminārāyaṇ tradition attempt to bowdlerize and render Sahajānand as "purely" Hindu. Various sectarian leaders attempt to systematize Sahajānand's teaching into a totalizing worldview and a unidirectional movement. However, such sectarian constructions cannot erase the multitudes of philosophical, historical, and devotional fragments in the wider Svāminārāyaṇ tradition.

The syncretism and diversity of the early community gave rise to later sectarian reinterpretations that systematize their particular understanding of Sahajānand's teaching, and the rest of this dissertation is the story of one such sect. As Svāminārāyaṇ factions multiplied in the twentieth century, BAPS laid claim to Sahajānand's legacy by mass mediating its particular theological teaching and sectarian guru lineage. BAPS' media were uniquely effective in spreading their particular interpretation of Sahajānand's teaching to the broadest possible audience, both in India and abroad. This was no small task because, in the early twentieth century, BAPS was not publicly recognized as part of the Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy. The story of how BAPS gained this recognition and positioned itself as Sahajānand's Svāmī's chief spokesman in the mid-twentieth century is the focus of the next chapter.

The twentieth century history of BAPS also illustrates a Svāminārāyaṇ transition from Sahajānand's complex agency to the institutional guru's expansive agency. Sahajānand's movement exercised strict control over his devotees' conduct to cultivate vairāgya, but he also blended different schools of philosophy and accommodated influences of other devotional communities and political powers. Later Svāminārāyaṇ organizations, by contrast, focused devotional energies on an exclusive, sectarian leader and his standardized, univocal teaching. As

BAPS vied for a position within the Sampradāy, they used mass mediation to center a far-flung devotional community on the singular figure of the guru. BAPS gurus extended their spiritual reach through magazines and newsletters and attuned devotees, particularly diasporic devotees, to perceive their presence in the printed word. Weekly printed updates on the guru's health and travel became the center of BAPS devotional assemblies, which centralized his authority and extended his divine agency through his institutional media apparatus.

Chapter Two: How BAPS Became Svāminārāyan:  
Print Media Production in the Gujarati Diaspora, 1938—1978



Figure 2.1: *Svāminārāyan Prakās*, February 1978, back-cover (left) and front-cover (right) feature montaged newspaper coverage on the last leg of BAPS’ third Guru, Pramukh Swami Maharaj’s second world tour, 1977—78. The Gujarati magazine cover labels the newspaper articles as such in Gujarati: *Samācār Patro* (right-center). Articles are written in English and Afrikaans from papers in the US, UK, and South Africa.

*Introduction: BAPS’ Foreign Publicity*

In the late-1970s, BAPS and its third guru, Pramukh Swami Maharaj, represented themselves as leaders of the Svāminārāyan Sampradāy in the foreign press. Newspaper coverage was an especially effective way to establish the guru’s spiritual presence in the new American and British Gujarati diasporas. Pramukh Swami used this foreign publicity to outstanding effect. Consider Figure 2.1, the cover of BAPS’ monthly magazine, *Svāminārāyan Prakās* (Light) in February of 1978: the back-cover (left) is headlined by the tabloid daily *New York Post*, and both

covers are filled with press coverage of the guru’s world tour from 1977 to ‘78. The foreign press—South and East African, British and American journalists—covered Pramukh Swami as the unqualified “World Leader of Swaminarayans” in their headlines.<sup>1</sup> For example, on August 24, 1977, the *New York Post* described him as “the leader of 30 million Swaminarayans worldwide,” a number of devotees that no Svāminārāyaṇ leader has ever seriously claimed.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, both the *Post* article and the *Prakāś* reprint promote the BAPS guru as a serious VIP: “one of the world’s greatest authorities on Hinduism” in Leicester; a “World spiritual head” in South Africa; a “specialist in music and a scholar in Sanskrit” ... “whom no woman may touch” in Johannesburg; and importantly “one of the few tourists in London who will not be striving to catch a glimpse of her Majesty” as “His religion forbids” looking at women. This chapter argues that Svāminārāyaṇ Hinduism first became “His religion” in the English-reading public outside of India. Mass mediation in the Hindu diaspora enabled Pramukh Swami’s new spiritual claims that were impossible for most of BAPS’ preceding history in India.

This chapter explores how print media work allowed the group known as “BAPS” to become “Svāminārāyaṇ,” bringing new implications for religious studies of the Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy and diasporic Hinduism. Over the mid-twentieth century, the gurus of BAPS used print media—both their internal publications and the press—to spread their spiritual presence around a growing devotee network, especially in the Gujarati diaspora. Beginning in 1938, BAPS published

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<sup>1</sup> Indian newspapers would not follow suit; they were familiar with the multiple, competing claims to Svāminārāyaṇ spiritual leadership and contentious litigation since the 1930s.

<sup>2</sup> The number of BAPS householder devotees is difficult to estimate, but there are records for the number of sādhus initiated. For example, in 1976 BAPS had a total of 224 sādhus, cited in Raymond Brady Williams, “Training Religious Specialists for a Transnational Hinduism: A Swaminarayan Sadhu Training Center.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 66, no. 4 (Winter 1998): 860. To be sure, BAPS membership was growing rapidly in the 1970s, but thirty million must be understood as hyperbole. Since the 1980s, BAPS has represented its membership to academics as roughly one million followers. They continued to claim one million followers during my 2018 fieldwork, but I took this as an underestimation. Mediations during the Covid-19 pandemic indicated that BAPS’ online audience in 2020 consisted of three million viewers.

a monthly devotional magazine, *Svāminārāyaṇ Prakāś*, to connect readers with its first guru, Shastriji Maharaj, when his following was not publicly recognized as Svāminārāyaṇ in India. Then in 1956, the second guru, Yogiji Maharaj, began circulating his instructions for devotional assemblies with a weekly newsletter called the *Satsaṅg Patrikā*. I argue the *Patrikā* spread the guru’s spiritual omnipresence to devotees in the diaspora and expanding BAPS’ membership, particularly in East Africa. After surveying controversies that split BAPS in the 1960s, the chapter concludes by examining the third guru, Pramukh Swami Maharaj’s success publicizing his world tours and producing anglophone publications, culminating with the creating of the “English Publications Wing” in 1978. With all of these projects, BAPS enhanced the spiritual reach of its gurus through print media circulation, making them present in the lives of diasporic devotees in East Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

In recent decades, scholarly accounts have represented BAPS as a leader of Svāminārāyaṇ Hinduism.<sup>3</sup> However, in its early years, the erstwhile “Akshar Purushottam Group” was prohibited from publicly identifying as “Svāminārāyaṇ” in India, as demonstrated by a series of Gujarati court battles in the 1930s and ‘40s.<sup>4</sup> The group currently known as “BAPS” was only able to become the leader of “Svāminārāyaṇs” when it reached “a literary and academic public outside of India.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See for example: Prema Kurien, *A Place at the Multicultural Table: The Development of an American Hinduism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007); Martha Nussbaum, *The Clash Within: Democracy, Religious Violence, and India’s Future* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); Hanna Kim, “Svāminārāyaṇa: Bhaktiyoga and the Akṣarbrahman Guru,” in *Gurus of Modern Yoga*, ed. Mark Singleton and Ellen Goldberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 237—260; Raymond Brady Williams, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hinduism, Third Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Brian Hatcher, *Hinduism Before Reform* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Williams, *Introduction*, 57. Current BAPS spokespersons unpack the acronym as “Bochasanwasi Sri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha,” which would technically abbreviate as “BSAPSS.” In 1936, established Svāminārāyaṇ leaders from Vadtal sued BAPS to stop preaching in their temples and stop publicly identifying as “Svāminārāyaṇ,” arguing their theology differed too greatly from other, older Svāminārāyaṇs to merit the name. After the court cases were settled in favor of the Vadtal Ācārya in 1943, the “Akshar Purushottam group” was officially incorporated as a private trust in 1946, called the “Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Sanstha”; this is how I refer to the group. See Appeal no. 165 of 1940 in the Court of the District Judge, Kaira, at Nadiad, decided 29 Nov 1943.

<sup>5</sup> *Svāminārāyaṇ Prakāś*, November 1974, 356.

Unaware of the preceding controversy, foreign journalists and academics accepted BAPS and Pramukh Swami's new, public claims to Svāminārāyaṇ and diasporic Hindu leadership. Through a critical examination of the media projects that enabled such claims, this chapter contextualizes the rise of BAPS within the historical contingencies of the Gujarati diaspora.

The 1960s and '70s were a transformative period for the Gujarati-reading public. Mass migration to the US began after 1965 reforms allowed 20,000 Indian immigrants per annum, and Uganda's Asian Expulsion of 1972 displaced roughly 30,000 South Asians to the UK nearly overnight. Throughout these mass migrations, BAPS transformed itself from a marginal guru following to one of the world's largest transnational Hindu organizations. This transformation was only possible because of their printed devotional materials; quick, cheap, and effective paper publications gave BAPS unprecedented access to a recently uprooted Gujarati diaspora. Publicity was a necessity for those building Gujarati community outside Gujarat in the 1960s and '70s; a dearth of mass-mediated—let alone direct, personal, or familial—connections between devotees living in the US and UK created both challenge and opportunity for Svāminārāyaṇ leaders. Established Svāminārāyaṇ authorities, the Ācāryas of Ahmedabad and Vadatal, found initial difficulty contacting their devotees so far from home. On the other hand, up-and-coming Svāminārāyaṇ figures, like BAPS' Yogiji Maharaj and Pramukh Swami, found new membership potential in diaspora once a burgeoning Gujarati community lived outside the realm of Ācārya control. Transnational media circulation enabled BAPS to circumvent older Svāminārāyaṇ authorities in Gujarat and begin a second life in the diaspora. Now, to contextualize the changes of the 1970s, the following section briefly surveys BAPS' early work in print media and their marginal status in the public of late-colonial India.

Svāminārāyaṇ Prakāś and *The Times of India*

BAPS' print media production began in 1938 with its first monthly magazine, *Svāminārāyaṇ Prakāś*, which is still in print today (see Figure 2.2). Early issues of the Gujarati-language *Prakāś* were short publications with essays on spiritual and moral topics and news about the guru's activities. The first issue, from October 1938, begins with a letter by Shastriji Maharaj, the first guru of BAPS. In this dedicatory letter, Shastriji authorizes a devotee in Ahmedabad, named Khengarji Chauhan, to begin publishing the official magazine of BAPS.<sup>6</sup> His letter explains that the purpose of the magazine was two-fold: 1) to spread BAPS community news (*samāchā*) to devotees and 2) to promote the glory (*mahimā*) of both God and guru, that is, Bhagvān Svāminārāyaṇ and Shastriji Maharaj himself. Shastriji's letter concludes by blessing all magazine readers with firm faith and divine happiness, and he specifically names around twenty devotees, whom he hopes will read his letter. Thus from the beginning, BAPS mass media work was endorsed directly from the top to praise the guru and form the community around him.

From its first issue, BAPS used *Svāminārāyaṇ Prakāś* to connect with and recruit new devotees to what it called the "Akshar Purushottam" group (the "AP" of BAPS). Shastriji's letter envisioned the magazine reaching "thousands of pure, believing devotees" who "decided to work hard" for BAPS.<sup>7</sup> These "thousands" were still an aspiration for Shastriji in 1938 when BAPS' number of devotees was quite small. Shastriji had only six *sādhus* and a handful of householding followers when he was excommunicated from the Vadtal Gadi in 1906. Under his leadership, the group grew, building five temples in Gujarat and initiating fifty *sādhus* during Shastriji's lifetime.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Svāminārāyaṇ Prakāś*, October 1938, 2.

<sup>7</sup> *Svāminārāyaṇ Prakāś*, October 1938, 2: "hajāro śuddh upāsanāvālā haribhaktone [...] prayās leva nakkī karyū."

<sup>8</sup> Williams, *Introduction*, 62—63.

Mass mediation was a new spiritual power for the BAPS guru in 1938. This inaugural letter in *Prakās*, and all of Shastriji’s writing, came to be considered divine revelation, with the highest spiritual authority in BAPS theology. For his devotees, Shastriji Maharaj was the brahmasvarūpa (form of God) guru, and Bhagvān Svāminārāyaṇ reveals himself through the guru’s words.<sup>9</sup> The Svāminārāyaṇ establishment, of course, rejected this belief. After all, Shastriji’s claim to brahmasvarūpa spiritual authority was the cause of his expulsion from the Svāminārāyaṇ temple of Vadtal.<sup>10</sup> Articulating and publishing these spiritual claims in Gujarat of 1938 was a radical development both theologically and litigiously.

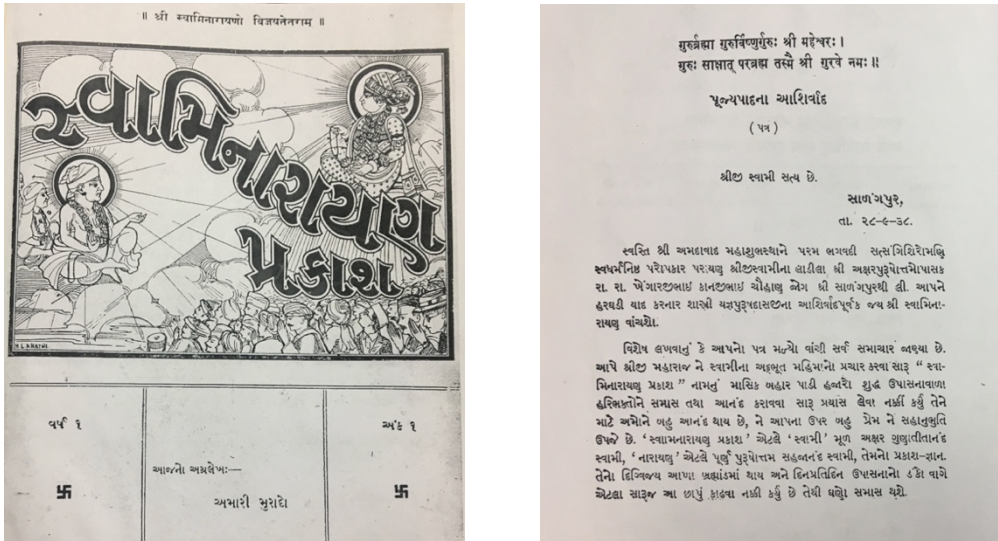


Figure 2.2 (left): Cover of the first issue of Svāminārāyaṇ Prakās, October 1938. The cover illustration shows the light of Sahajānand Svāmī (top right) shining on Guṇātīānand Svāmī (center left), the first historical figure in the BAPS guru lineage, and reflecting back down onto a crowd of young Indian men (bottom right). Figure 2.3 (right): Shastriji’s inaugural letter, Svāminārāyaṇ Prakās October 1938, 2.

BAPS’ magazine clearly identified the group as “Svāminārāyaṇ,” but contemporaneous Indian newspapers did not. In May of 1938, *The Times of India* ran a brief announcement for the consecration ceremony of BAPS’s third temple in the city of Gondal. The temple is described as

<sup>9</sup> Sadhu Paramtattvadas, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hindu Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 43.

<sup>10</sup> Williams, *Introduction*, 60—61. Shastriji left the Vadtal Gadi in 1905. The Vadtal Gadi later excommunicated Shastriji, or declared him vimukh (lit. “averse”), for his Akṣar Puruṣottam teaching. Their process of excommunication also became a matter of legal dispute decades later. See Appeal no. 165 of 1940 in the Court of the District Judge, Kaira, at Nadiad.

an “Akshar Purushottam” temple, and *The Times* does not use the term “Swaminarayan” in its announcement.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, when *The Times* reported on the Vadtal or Ahmedabad Gadi temples, the paper typically used the terms “Swaminarayan” or “the Swaminarayan religion” in this period.<sup>12</sup> In the English-language public of late-colonial India, BAPS was not Svāminārāyaṇ, but rather a spin-off, Akshar Purushottam group.

*The Times*’ public glosses were determined more by judicial precedent than editorial discretion. In 1936, the Vadtal Gadi filed suit against the Akshar Purushottam group after Shastriji Maharaj and a group of sādhus entered and began preaching at a Svāminārāyaṇ temple in the village of Ishnav, Gujarat. The Ishnav temple was a property of the Vadtal Gadi, who expelled Shastriji and did not recognize the Akshar Purushottam group as Svāminārāyaṇ adherents.<sup>13</sup> Vadtal’s Ācārya asked the court to prohibit Akshar Purushottam group sādhus from preaching in the Ishnav Svāminārāyaṇ temple and from claiming to be “Svāminārāyaṇ” at all. The Mumbai Presidency court ruled in favor of the Vadtal Gadi, barring BAPS from the Ishnav Svāminārāyaṇ temple and agreeing the Akshar Purushottam group could not publicly identify as “Svāminārāyaṇ.”<sup>14</sup> Thus by 1938, *The Times* was already working with religious categories of material and legal consequence.

BAPS appealed the 1936 decision to the colonial District Court, where Judge J.D. Kapadiya upheld most of the lower court’s ruling, with some exceptions.<sup>15</sup> Kapadiya’s decision,

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<sup>11</sup> “The Rest of The News,” *Times of India*, May 28, 1938, 12.

<sup>12</sup> For examples of “Swaminarayan” in *The Times of India*, see “Claim to an Ascetic’s Property,” Jul. 9, 1884, 3; “The Famine,” Apr. 7, 1900, 8; “Temple Murder Case,” Dec. 22, 1925, 12; “Rival Claimants to the Vadtal “Gadi” of Swaminarayan Sect,” Jun. 17, 1936, 17. *The Times* also printed the Sampradāy’s name as “Swami Narayan.” See for example: “Police Courts: A Temple’s Accounts,” May 20, 1915, 5; “A Hindu Reformer: Sri Swami Narayan,” Jun. 19, 1936, 5; “Ahmedabad Trials: Swami Narayan Temple Case,” Aug. 20, 1919, 10.

<sup>13</sup> Acharya Shri Anandprasadji Maharaj v. Shastri Shri Yagnapurushdasji, no. 519 (Borsad, 1936), cited in Williams, *Introduction*, 63.

<sup>14</sup> Williams, *Introduction*, 64.

<sup>15</sup> Shastri Shri Yagnapurushdasji v. Acharya Shri Anandprasadji Maharaj, Appeal no. 165 (Kaira District, at Nadiad, 1943).

issued on November 29, 1943, treats the issue in greater detail and gives insight into the stakes of the controversy for Gujarati Svāminārāyaṇ identity, theology, and property. The judge opines that civil courts should not decide what beliefs are heretical and not,<sup>16</sup> but his argument hinges on a core theological debate within the Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy. On the question of Kṛṣṇa’s divine status and the nature of avatāras, the ruling noted “fundamental differences” between the two groups, whose creeds are “miles apart.”<sup>17</sup> For example, the Vadtal Gadi claimed in court that Kṛṣṇa was spiritually superior to Svāminārāyaṇ, while the Akshar Purushottam group claimed that Svāminārāyaṇ was superior to Kṛṣṇa.<sup>18</sup> Based on his reading of the Svāminārāyaṇ and Vaiṣṇava scriptures, the judge sided with the Vadtal Gadi’s position and dismissed BAPS’ understanding, saying “the scriptures do not bear any such interpretation.”<sup>19</sup> Based in part on these theological distinctions, Kapadiya found the Akshar Purushottam to be separate from the Svāminārāyaṇ religion of the Vadtal Gadi and unable to make claims on its temples or property.

BAPS lost the appeal, but they gained a legal foothold within the public discourse on Svāminārāyaṇ religion in late-colonial India. Judge Kapadiya’s opinion continued, “as far as the law courts are concerned the accepted position [is] that the Swaminarayan sect is a branch of Vaishnavism, which is one of the two main divisions in Hinduism.”<sup>20</sup> Theretofore, the Vadtal and Ahmedabad Gadis were the only two recognized institutions of Svāminārāyaṇ Hinduism. However, in 1943 Judge Kapadiya interpolated BAPS as a “rival sect” of Svāminārāyaṇ Hindus, and he compared their relationship to the Gadis with that of Protestants Christians to the Catholic Church.<sup>21</sup> Kapadiya accepted that BAPS followers would be “negatively affected” if he declared

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<sup>16</sup> Yagnapurushdasji, 165, at 15.

<sup>17</sup> Yagnapurushdasji, 165, at 48.

<sup>18</sup> Yagnapurushdasji, 165, at 36.

<sup>19</sup> Yagnapurushdasji, 165, at 54.

<sup>20</sup> Yagnapurushdasji, 165, at 19.

<sup>21</sup> Yagnapurushdasji, 165, at 14—15.

them to be non-Svāminārāyaṇ; therefore, he refrained from doing so. He opined, “they may belong to the same Swaminarayan sect” as the Vadtal Gadi,<sup>22</sup> but their differences are so profound that “the schism cannot be bridged.”<sup>23</sup> BAPS was legally excluded from the Vadtal Gadi, but they won the legal ability to become a new group of Svāminārāyaṇs in Gujarat. Still, Indian newspapers would not call them “Svāminārāyaṇ” for decades to come, given their contentious relationship with the wealthy and influential Gadi establishment. As Judge Kapadiya rightly noted, “this is merely a test case,” with implications for the future of public representation and management of the Svāminārāyaṇ religion. Under the leadership of Shastriji Maharaj, a plucky BAPS fought for public recognition but often found itself on the margins Svāminārāyaṇ Hinduism in late-colonial India

Satsaṅg Patrikā: *Organizing the African Diaspora*

When Yogiji Maharaj became the second guru of BAPS in 1951, he instituted two changes that would make BAPS especially popular in the East African Gujarati diaspora: 1) he asked all devotees to attend a weekly devotional assembly (sabhā) every Sunday, and 2) he began writing weekly postcards that instructed householding devotees on how to conduct their assemblies. Yogiji’s postcards replaced the guru’s and sādhus’ physical presence with a spiritual presence in his handwriting. The instructions also empowered devotees to stand in for the renunciants and become leaders of their local Svāminārāyaṇ maṇḍals (groups). His postcards outlined a schedule for a weekly devotional assembly on Sunday: one or two readings from the *Vacanāmṛt* (Sahajānand Svāmī’s discourses), ten short lines from the *Svāmīnī Vāto* (the sayings of Guṇātītānand Svāmī), and a certain amount of time, five or ten minutes, for chanting the mantra “Svāminārāyaṇ.” These postcard instructions were an important and affordable way for Yogiji

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<sup>22</sup> Yagnapurushdasji, 165, at 48.

<sup>23</sup> Yagnapurushdasji, 165, at 48.

Maharaj to expand BAPS membership and regularize their communal practice. But, according to BAPS sādhus, the task of writing instructions by hand to so many different mandāls every week became overly burdensome, and in 1956 the Mumbai temple acquired a cyclostyle printer to assist the guru.

The weekly printed version of the guru's instructions was called the *Satsaṅg Patrikā* (Community Newsletter). The transition from the medium of handwritten postcards to the mass medium of cyclostyle printing created a newsletter that could, for the first time, reach hundreds of devotee groups every week.<sup>24</sup> A devotee in Mumbai named Dadubhai Patel was placed in charge of the newsletter. Each week, Dadubhai arranged the single-page, double-sided newsletter with the guru's instruction for worship, updates on his travels and health, excerpts from his speeches, and announcements for upcoming events. Using the cyclostyle, Dadubhai wrote the newsletter content by hand with a stylus onto a wax template and placed it in the printer, which applied ink to the template and ran sheets of paper across it, creating the copies. Later, Dadubhai was able to create the template by typing with a typewriter. He mailed out the *Patrikā* from Mumbai every Wednesday, so devotee groups in the villages received it in time to prepare for sabhā on Sunday. From 1956, the newsletter readership quickly began to expand; Dadubhai published 400 copies of the *Patrikā* by Diwali 1958 and 600 by August 1959.<sup>25</sup> His work in mass mediation quickly made Dadubhai an important lay leader in BAPS; Yogiji Maharaj regularly thanked him for his printing sevā in the 1950s and '60s.

With the *Patrikā*, Yogiji became spiritually omnipresent around the BAPS mandāls of Gujarat and East Africa. His weekly updates, instructions, and messages extended his persona and

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<sup>24</sup> Cyclostyle printing, invented by Thomas Edison, enables a hand-written script to be mechanically reproduced through a wax template. Through the early years of *Satsaṅg Patrikā*, the newsletter still resembles a hand-written letter, but was actually printed via cyclostyle.

<sup>25</sup> Yogiji Maharaj cites these numbers: *Satsaṅg Patrikā*, Nov. 12, 1958, 1; and *Satsaṅg Patrikā*, Aug. 5, 1959, 1.

solidified the BAPS network through a shared experience of the guru's printed presence. As Yogiji explained in a later *Patrikā*, "What is the main point of this newsletter? In accordance with most revered Swami Shastriji Maharaj's wish, it is to increase our unity, goodwill, and solidarity."<sup>26</sup> Building on Shastriji Maharaj's use of *Svāminārāyaṇ Prakāś* to connect with early BAPS devotees, Yogiji's *Patrikā* made more frequent contact that imbedded the guru into devotees' weekly worship. The *Patrikā*'s direct impact on their devotional practice trained devotees in each maṇḍal to perceive Yogiji's divine presence in the printed word. Scholars have argued that mass mediation technologies, rather than undermine or stultify the guru's charisma, more often "re-activate" and spread the guru's aura throughout their community of devotees.<sup>27</sup> The *Satsaṅg Patrikā* was one such case in which the guru's advice was mass reproduced and made relevant for hundreds of devotee groups.

The cyclostyle *Patrikā* formalized devotees' communication with BAPS leadership in Mumbai, which both enabled and constrained their contact with the guru. News from the Mumbai temple to the BAPS maṇḍals was increased and standardized. All devotees received the same instructions through the weekly newsletter, and with the cyclostyle printer, Dadubhai could relay more information than the handwritten postcards. The increased weekly communication was also two-way. From the beginning, the *Patrikā* asked readers to mail back written reports of their weekly meetings, including information on their attendance and activities. This marks a

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<sup>26</sup> *Satsaṅg Patrikā*, Aug. 21, 1963, 1: "ā patrikāno mukhya het ū che to param pūjya svāmī śastrī mahārājna abhiprāy prāmāṇe samp ne suhṛdbhāv ne ektā andaroandar vadhārāvī." Yogiji's Gujarati phrase for "unity, goodwill, and solidarity," "samp, suhṛdbhav, ane ektā." After Pramukh Swami's passing in 2016, Mahant Swami began reusing this phrase amid concerns that the BAPS community could fracture again.

<sup>27</sup> Copeman and Ikegame have noted that Hindu gurus are generally often successful in using mass mediation to maintain and enhance their personal connection with devotees. Drawing conceptually from Walter Benjamin's notion of aura, they argue, "Technologies of mechanical reproduction thus seem less to have undermined the authority of gurus than to have successfully amplified it while creating scattered but connected spaces of the faithful." Jacob Copeman and Aya Ikegame, "The Multifarious Guru: An Introduction," in *The Guru in South Asia: New Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Jacob Copeman and Aya Ikegame (London: Routledge, 2014), 26. The *Satsaṅg Patrikā* is certainly another example of this trend within the Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy.

hierarchical development in the relation between devotees and the guru. Those who received the *Patrikā* were elevated as leaders over their fellow devotees, empowered with directions from the guru, and asked to supervise their peers for the weekly reports. Mandāḷ leaders organized the BAPS grassroots through paper practices: reading the cyclostyle *Patrikā* and submitting their reports by post.<sup>28</sup> In these senses, the mass medium enhanced certain devotees' contact with the guru, but at the same time, the growing volume of mail flowing in and out of the Mumbai temple required a new process for personal contact with the guru.

With the increased *Patrikā* circulation, the number of response letters and mandāḷ reports soon created an administrative hassle at BAPS' Mumbai temple. *Patrikā* publishers announced in 1958 that Yogiji Maharaj received too many letters every day, and in order to receive an answer, letter-writing devotees should cover their return postage fee; every "three or four days upwards of a hundred letters have accumulated [...] it is very difficult for [Yogiji] to reply to all the letters - please understand. So all groups are requested: those who want [Yogiji's] blessing or answers, send him a Reply Paid Post Card or pre-addressed envelope to make that possible [underline original]."<sup>29</sup> This small cost of return postage is an early instance in a trend of constraining personal access to the guru because of BAPS' sheer number of devotees. In this sense, the guru's mass-mediated newsletter started restricting personal access for individual devotees. However, Yogiji Maharaj was clearly pleased by the greater quantity of readers and followers.

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<sup>28</sup> These days, the Central Satsaṅg Kāryalay (office) at the BAPS temple in Shahibaug, Ahmedabad makes a standard curriculum for all mandāḷs. Now three versions of the *Patrikā* are distributed monthly on the 15<sup>th</sup>, one for the main sabhā, one for young devotees, and one for women's groups. Over the years, the news update sections were incorporated into BAPS magazines, websites, and the old *Satsaṅg Patrikā* was officially phased out in 2001.

<sup>29</sup> *Satsaṅg Patrikā*, Apr. 9, 1958, 1: "3 ke 4 divasmā so uparānt patro ekthā thai jāy che [...] āṭlā badhā patronā javāb lakhvā te keṭlū muśkel kārya che te āpaṇe – samajvū joie. To sarve mandāḷone vinanti ke jemane p. pū. svāmījīnā āśīrvād ke javābnī tarat āv śyaktā hoy temane rīplāy peid post kard agar śīrnāmū karelū kavār mokalvū."

Yogiji Maharaj used messages in the *Patrikā* to celebrate BAPS' growth and encourage devotees to recruit more followers, often saying "make the community grow" (*satsaṅg vadhārvano*), and "attend the assembly" (*sabhā bharvī*).<sup>30</sup> In one early example, a *Patrikā* from August of 1957 published a special request from Yogiji Maharaj for volunteers to bring more members into BAPS weekly meetings: "We have 367 groups running in this country, but they are not running vigorously enough. Knowing this, I am now letting the groups know just one request I have. Read the Mumbai *Patrikā* when it comes every Sunday, set aside two hours of special time, take courage, and attend the *sabhā*. That is the plea."<sup>31</sup> Why were 367 groups not enough for Yogiji? By 1957, BAPS was the largest it had ever been, and the guru was already overburdened with hundreds of letters each week. Yogiji typically explained the need for expansion as an imperative of his own guru-bhakti for Shastriji Maharaj. Yogiji said it would please Shastriji to see how much his following has grown. Just as devotees were constantly trying to please Yogiji, he also strove to please his guru predecessor.

Yogiji turned to the *Patrikā* to encourage BAPS growth in the 1950s, perhaps because his direct, personal encouragement proved less effective for long-term community formation among devotees. According to a BAPS *sādhū*, Yogiji Maharaj had difficulty establishing a permanent *maṇḍaḷ* in Ahmedabad by personal contact alone. When he visited the city, Yogiji gathered a group of young Ahmedabadi devotees, preached to them, and asked them to meet every week on Sunday. However, the young devotees were inconsistent practitioners without the guru's supervision, and the group disbanded whenever the guru was out of town. Yogiji personally reconvened the

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<sup>30</sup> These injunctions were regular, for example in the *Satsaṅg Patrikā*s from July 24, 1957; August 7, 1957; November 12, 1958; April 29, 1959; July 29, 1959; August 5, 1959; August 12, 1959; August 26, 1959; October 28, 1959; November 11, 1959; August 7, 1963; September 28, 1970.

<sup>31</sup> *Satsaṅg Patrikā*, August 7, 1957: "Ā deśmā maṇḍaḷo 367 maṇḍaḷo cāle che paṅ barābar jordār cāltā nathī te jāṅvā maḷyū che to have māri ekaj vinanti maṇḍaḷone jāṅvū chū. Dar ravivāre Mumbainī patrikā āve te vāncīne be kalāk kīmatī ṭāim kādhīne śuravīr thaine sabhā bharo ej araj che."

Ahmedabad maṇḍaḷ seventeen times in the 1950s before they consistently met on their own accord. The cyclostyle *Patrikā* facilitated BAPS organizing when personal guru contact was rare, and the most responsive readers in the 1950s were the diasporic devotees in East Africa.

In December of 1956, a pan-Svāminārāyaṇ organization called the East Africa Satsaṅg Maṇḍaḷ organized a youth conference in Nairobi, which gathered South Asians from Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. In early December, the *Patrikā* made a series of announcements promoting the conference and reminding devotees of their responsibilities: “It is [Yogiji’s] prayer that this Nairobi conference can set an example, and that great devotees will take responsibility for its program so the work will be simple.”<sup>32</sup> The conference appeared to be a major success in the *Patrikā* coverage, which continued into 1957. The longest-ever edition of the *Patrikā* covered the youth conference with a twenty-four-page supplement following the typical two-page newsletter. The sheer length of this *Patrikā* conveys the excitement of diasporic BAPS devotees in the wake of this organizing success. The supplement was written by East African devotees who recorded the events, names of speakers, and excerpts from their speeches. Yogiji Maharaj sent a written blessing that was read at the conference, expressing his hope that more and more young devotees would gather in Africa, and in five years, five thousand youths would come for a conference.<sup>33</sup> Once again, Yogiji expresses his desire for the BAPS community to grow numerically. Shastriji Maharaj’s 1938 vision in *Prakāś* for “thousands of pure, believing devotees” seemed achievable in 1956 Nairobi.

As Yogiji explained, one purpose of the East African conference was to set an example for devotees back in India. He wrote in the *Patrikā*:

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<sup>32</sup> *Satsaṅg Patrikā*, December 5, 1956, 2: “Nairobīnū ā adhivēśan dākhlarūp bane ane teno kāryakram haribhaktō māthe upāḍī le ane temnū kārya saraḷ bane evī svāmīśrījīne prarthanā che.”

<sup>33</sup> *Satsaṅg Patrikā*, January 23, 1957.

They have shown all that the East Africa Svāminārāyaṇ Satsaṅg Maṇḍal and its workers can certainly increase the unity and goodwill in the Sampradāy, and its echo will absolutely reverberate in Kutch, Katiavad, and Gujarat. [...] And in this country, with the Mumbai and Ahmedabad maṇḍals conducting good conferences in the same way, according to Swami Yogiji Maharaj’s command, satsaṅg activities are being promoted. Knowing that, all maṇḍals are invited to follow this example.<sup>34</sup>

Yogiji hoped that unity and organization abroad would foster unity and organization back home. This message in the *Patrikā* alternates between referring to Yogiji in the first- and third-person, which occasionally happened when the publisher, Dadubhai, would blend direct quotes from Yogiji with his own editorial flourishes. The *Patrikā* also encouraged Indian devotees to announce any conferences in the press: “All groups are invited to fix their own programs and announce them in the *Mumbai Times*.”<sup>35</sup> This is perhaps the first recorded instance of Yogiji encouraging devotees to publish their spiritual activities in newspapers. The mass media work of the African diaspora influenced devotee organizers back in India; its echo reverberated in Gujarat. The African conference published announcements and reports in the press, and their success became exemplary for BAPS’ Indian devotees to emulate.

BAPS gained momentum in Gujarat over the following year, and by Diwali 1958, Yogiji gave a blessing for the new year with ambitious new goals. He wrote, “Read the newsletter, attend the sabhā, that’s what makes me happy. There are 400 maṇḍals. Now there should be 1000 maṇḍals in the new year. [Yogiji] and Shastriji Maharaj have demanded that, so [Yogiji] will fulfill this

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<sup>34</sup> *Satsaṅg Patrikā*, December 26, 1956, 1—2: “te sarva batāvī āpe che ke pūrva āfrīkā svāminārāyaṇ satsaṅg maṇḍal ane tenā kāryakartāo sampradāymā ektā ne suhrdbhāv jarūr vadhārī śakṣe ane teno paḍadho kacch, kaṭhiyāvāḍ ane gujarātmā jarūr paḍsej. [...] Deśmā paṇ Mumbai ane Amdāvād maṇḍalo ā rīte sāro jñānyajña kartā kartā satsaṅgnī pravṛtio p. pū. yogījī mahārājnī ājñānusār upāḍī rahel che te jāṇī sau maṇḍalo dākhlo leše evī vinantī che.”

<sup>35</sup> *Satsaṅg Patrikā*, January 30, 1957. “Sarve maṇḍalo potāno karykram dhaḍī rākhe ane Mumbai ṭāimsar jaṇāve tevī vinantī che.”

vision.”<sup>36</sup> Yogiji was pleased with how quickly the *Patrikā* circulation was increasing, and he set his sights even higher.<sup>37</sup> In 1938, Shastriji Maharaj hoped the *Prakāś* would draw thousands of devotee-readers per month, and twenty years later, Yogiji envisioned the *Patrikā* organizing one thousand devotee groups per week. Perhaps he saw the growth as evidence of Bhagvān Svāminārāyaṇ’s presence within BAPS and the fulfillment of Shastriji’s vision. Devotees certainly pleased Yogiji by gathering larger groups for weekly assembly, and he conveyed his happiness through his 1958 Diwali message. *Patrikā* readers could sense in the guru’s words that they achieved the gurunā rājīpo that year.

Unfortunately, 1959 brought some unhappy struggles to the satsaṅg development. That April, Yogiji wrote a special message to address some *Patrikā*-reading groups who stopped meeting every week. The guru asked senior community members to set them straight and reconvene the groups:

So many village maṇḍaḷs have broken down; stop that. Knowing that God is far away, a village leader should shout at them, and run the group organization, that’s great service. This is not a bad thing, as it usually is, because you should understand Sunday to be a precious day; being a hero, remove whomever you please and absolutely attend the sabhā. [...] We must make 1001 maṇḍaḷs, [...] So now, leader sahib of every village, I recommend this much to you: read Dadubhai’s newsletter from Mumbai, over 400 copies are printed [...] Everyone attend the sabhā and enforce the *Patrikā*. This is our special, urgent request so please accept.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> *Satsaṅg Patrikā*, November 12, 1958, 1: “Patrikā vāncine sabhā bhavī ej rājīpo che. 400 maṇḍaḷo to che. Have 1000 maṇḍaḷ navā varṣmā thāy te maṭe svāmiśrīji tathā śāstrījī mahārāj pāse māṅgaṇī karī che to svāmiśrījī sankalp puro karṣe.”

<sup>37</sup> BAPS devotees often explain that the aim of all their sevā, all their activities as devotees are to please the guru (bāpā rājī taṣe). In this sense, when the guru says something makes him happy (rājī), devotee readers are sure to notice.

<sup>38</sup> *Satsaṅg Patrikā*, April 29, 1959, 1: “Keṭlāk gāmnā maṇḍaḷ bhāgyā tūtyā che to tem na kartā bhagvāne antarjāmī jāñine je gāmnā pramukh hoy temṇe khaṭako rākhīne maṇḍaḷone vyavasthit calāvavā te kharī sevā che. Ā sāmānya koṭinī vāt nathī māṭe sūrṅvir thaine, game te bhoge, ravivārno divas kīmmatī samajine ravivāre sabhā cokas bhavī [...] 1001 maṇḍaḷo karvānā che [...] To have darek gāmnā pramukh sāheb tamone eṭlī ja bhalāmaṅ che juvo param bhagavadī dadubhai, mumbainā haribhaktō dar budhavāre patrikā 400 uparnā kāgaḷo lāvavā, [...] te divase sabhā bhavī paṅ patrikāno amal karvo te khās amārī āgrahbhārī vinanti che to svikārso.”

When Yogiji was physically distant, he deputized local leaders to “be a hero” (sūrvīr thaine) and remove, or sacrifice, whomever they deemed necessary (game te bhōge). In the late-1950s, these were likely young members who distracted other satsaṅgis (members) or discouraged them from attending Sunday assemblies. Yogiji also used the cyclostyle newsletter to authorize maṅḍaḷ leaders to discipline their fellow devotees and remove members from the community if necessary. In the coming decade, Yogiji’s satsaṅg would also remove a greater number of followers for teaching unorthodox beliefs, changing BAPS’ gender norms, and allowing other gurus to influence its devotees. Beginning with this special request, and a string of similar *Patrikā* announcements through the summer of 1959, Yogiji showed how central this mass medium became for his connection with devotees.

BAPS formalized its attendance records in response to Yogiji’s frustration with flagging participation. The Mumbai temple established a new filing system to keep a closer watch on their maṅḍaḷs. BAPS sādhus, Dadubhai, and other volunteers kept files for each maṅḍaḷ, tracking their attendance and activities through their mail-in reports. In August 1959, Yogiji explained the system to *Patrikā* readers thus: “When you attend the sabhā, then on Monday, write a letter to Mumbai, letting us know how many devotee brothers came together. Write this report to Mumbai. Thus in Mumbai there is a file for every village group, this way we can understand how the village maṅḍaḷ is running. We will know that.”<sup>39</sup> Yogiji describes an administrative system, likely run by Pramukh Swami, that was unmatched in the Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy. With weekly updates from every group constantly updating an institutional archive, BAPS was increasingly able to organize its transnational network of devotees in the following decades.

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<sup>39</sup> *Satsaṅg Patrikā*, August 12, 1959, 1: “Jyāre sabhā bhāro tyāre somvāre patra lakhīne Mumbai khabar āpvī āṇṇā āṭlā satsaṅgībhāio bhegā dhīyā te rīpoṭ Mumbai lakhvo. Atre Mumbaimā dārek gāmnā maṅḍaḷnī fāil rahe che tethī samaj paḍe che ke ā gāmnū maṅḍaḷ cāle che te khabar paḍe.”

In the late-1950s, diasporic devotional groups were the most dependable to submit weekly attendance reports. Yogiji Maharaj chided Indian groups in the 1959 *Patrikā* for lagging behind in submitting their reports, especially compared to the East African devotees: “Look, all the devotees in Africa are following our newsletter, attending the sabhā, and their reports are coming in, so we should take strength and do that. That’s it.”<sup>40</sup> According to Yogiji, the BAPS diaspora was exemplary in their use and response to mass media. That November, the *Patrikā* printed a blessing from Yogiji, in which he thanked the Kampala, Uganda group for their letters and said he would continue enjoying them.<sup>41</sup> Devotees in Africa led the way in solidifying BAPS’ bureaucratic attendance system with their enthusiastic response to calls for written reports.

The diaspora’s mass-mediated relationship with the guru also became the standard for BAPS devotees in India. During my fieldwork, one BAPS sādhu born and raised in East Africa offered an explanation for how the diaspora normalized report writing. In his view, diasporic Gujaratis were initially more responsive to the *Patrikā* because they lived farther away from the Gujarati community. They were in the habit of reading and writing notes, sending good wishes, for example, on Diwali. Letters and publications from India took on greater significance for those outside the country. Diasporic isolation and nostalgia fostered an enthusiasm for mass media habits as a way to maintain social connections. The same was true of their relationship with the guru. For most of their lives, diasporic devotees connected with the guru solely through the printed word, and sending back reports was their way of fostering that connection. Devotees in India were initially less persuadable to participate in this mass mediation, this sādhu said, but not anymore. Now everyone in India is in the habit of filling out reports. It used to be on paper, and today

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<sup>40</sup> *Satsaṅg Patrikā*, August 12, 1959, 1: “Juvo āfrikānā tamām haribhakto āṇṇī patrikā pramāṇe sabhā bhare che ne rīpoṛṭ āve che to āṇṇe baḷ rākhīne karvū. Ej.”

<sup>41</sup> *Satsaṅg Patrikā*, November 11, 1958, 1.

everything is online: “in our present times, now reporting is very normal, it is very natural.” BAPS recognized the diaspora’s habit of submitting reports before mass mediation became so pervasive. Compared with other Svāminārāyaṇ groups, BAPS was more attentive to these diasporic sensibilities, partly because their growth depended so heavily on the African diaspora. However, as the next section describes, the devotees who mediated the guru’s presence could also wield the guru’s authority, bringing conflict to the growing organization.

*BAPS Transitions: 1966—1971*

Yogiji Maharaj often wrote that the purpose of the *Satsaṅg Patrikā* was to enhance BAPS’ unity, but in the mid-1960s, the *Patrikā* and its publisher became the center of a controversy that divided BAPS. Transnational mass mediation was both successful and unwieldy for BAPS, fostering both organization and fracture. The *Patrikā* helped BAPS devotees in East Africa organize themselves, become self-sufficient, and in 1964 they separated from the East African Satsaṅg Maṇḍal. Yogiji Maharaj made several trips as BAPS guru visit devotees in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. He consecrated a BAPS temple in Mombasa in 1957, Kampala and Jinja in 1960, and Nairobi in 1970. In this sense, the 1960s was a successful decade of satsaṅg growth in East Africa. At the same time, the enthusiasm of some diasporic devotees and one BAPS media producer also led to new fractures.

Dadubhai Patel, the prominent satsaṅgi and *Patrikā* publisher, was sent by Yogiji on a tour of East Africa in the 1960s to preach, recruit devotees, and raise funds for temple construction. In 1966, a dispute arose when Dadubhai began initiating female devotees as renunciants for BAPS. BAPS temples have never accepted female devotees as ascetics, and the trustees in India soon ordered Dadubhai to cease initiating women. In response, Dadubhai claimed to possess a

handwritten letter from Yogiji Maharaj that authorized him to initiate women as renunciants.<sup>42</sup> Dadubhai believed it was always Yogiji's divine plan to incorporate women into BAPS' ascetic hierarchy, just as Bhagvān Svāminārāyaṇ did in the early Sampradāy. Interestingly, the BAPS pioneer of mass mediation appealed to a non-mass, handwritten letter as a spiritual justification for his actions. The marks of Yogiji's pen indexed the authentically divine inspiration behind the change in BAPS' gender norms. Nevertheless, Dadubhai's personal connection with the guru became suspect, and BAPS leaders dismissed his claim that the guru endorsed such gender reforms.

Dadubhai left BAPS in 1966 and formed his own Svāminārāyaṇ organization, called the Yogi Divine Society. Yogiji and the BAPS trustees decided to expel Dadubhai, and the fracture played out in the pages of *Svāminārāyaṇ Prakāś*.<sup>43</sup> Around thirty sādhus left BAPS in protest of the decision and solidarity with Dadubhai, which was a significant blow to the budding organization. Some of Dadubhai's followers maintain that Pramukh Swami pushed him out of BAPS because he and the *Patrikā* became too powerful.<sup>44</sup> Current members of the Yogi Divine Society suggest that the brahmin Dave family, who later assumed leadership of BAPS publishing, forced Dadubhai out because of his lower caste standing. The Mumbai temple and Mahant Swami, the erstwhile temple purohit, acquired ownership of the newsletter, and Dadubhai was effectively excommunicated from the satsaṅg.

BAPS' growth and mass mediation in the 1960s made administrators anxious about the proper beliefs of their new followers. After all, Dadubhai was a leading organizer, a BAPS

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<sup>42</sup> Raymond Brady Williams, *A new face of Hinduism: the Swaminarayan religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 55.

<sup>43</sup> Williams, *A new face*, 56: "official notice was given by [Yogiji Maharaj] and the trustees in the organization's Gujarati monthly, *Swaminarayan Prakash* (July, 1966) for those who left to return and that [Yogiji Maharaj] signed the order of expulsion when Dadubhai and his followers did not obey."

<sup>44</sup> Williams, *A new face*, 56.

spokesman, and he believed Svāminārāyaṇ supported women becoming ascetics. The questions arose: was BAPS truly achieving Sahstriji Maharaj’s vision for “thousands of *pure, believing* devotees”? At a time of rapid satsaṅg growth, how could they be certain that all new devotees understood their Akṣar Puruṣottam theology correctly? Dadubhai posed a threat to its teaching of a singular guru, Akṣar, who is the exclusive connection to Svāminārāyaṇ, Puruṣottam. He continued claiming divine inspiration from Yogiji after his expulsion and became the guru of the Yogi Divine Society. In the wake of Dadubhai’s exit, BAPS sādhus refocused their publication operation on the theological clarity of its followers. Members of the brahmin Dave family became leaders of the new mass media projects—standardized tests, international press coverage, and English-language publications—which characterized BAPS publications in the 1970s.

In addition to the tumult around Dadubhai, BAPS underwent a guru transition in 1971. Yogiji Maharaj passed away in January 1971, and Pramukh Swami Maharaj succeeded him as the third guru of BAPS. As with other shifts, this guru transition prompted further media production. The news of Yogiji Maharaj’s death was circulated around BAPS with a ‘Stop Press’ announcement in the *Satsaṅg Patrikā* of January 25, 1971.<sup>45</sup> Within months, the Mumbai temple published a Gujarati hagiography on Yogiji’s life, *Yogījī Mahārājnū Jīvancaṛitra*, written by a Harshad (H.T.) Dave, the BAPS Secretary and lead sevak of publications after Dadubhai.<sup>46</sup>

When Pramukh Swami became the third guru, he reunited administrative and spiritual authority in BAPS. At the time of Yogiji’s passing, Pramukh Swami was a young and respected leader within BAPS. Twenty years prior, Shastriji Maharaj had appointed him as the administrative head of BAPS, earning him the nickname of Pramukh (“President”) Swami. In BAPS’ early years,

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<sup>45</sup> *Satsaṅg Patrikā*, January 25, 1971, 2

<sup>46</sup> *Satsaṅg Patrikā*, July 12, 1971, 2.

Shastriji Maharaj handled both spiritual affairs—from issues of theological doctrine to pastoral care for devotees—and administrative affairs—fundraising for temples and housing the sādhus. In his time, BAPS was poor; even as the guru, Shastriji regularly begged on the street for train tickets and food. During his tenure as the administrative head (1951—1971), Pramukh Swami organized BAPS with new bureaucratic initiatives like the attendance report filing system. By 1971, BAPS was at a point of financial sufficiency wherein the guru would never beg for money in the same way. Effective and consolidated administration characterized all of Pramukh Swami’s endeavors as the third BAPS guru, including the revamped BAPS Publications Wing in the 1970s.

#### *English Publications in the 1970s*

After the years of transition, Pramukh Swami reorganized BAPS’ media projects into the Publications Wing. Over the course of the 1970s, the Wing was subdivided into three divisions for Gujarati, Hindi, and English publications. In many ways, Harshad Dave led the way for English language BAPS media, and his legacy continues influencing its publishing today. Dave’s son took initiation as BAPS sādhu, receiving the name Sadhu Ishwarcharandas, or Ishwar Swami. Pramukh Swami appointed Ishwar Swami as the head of the BAPS Publications Wing after his father’s death, and he still oversees the Wing at present. The remainder of this chapter considers the work of the 1970s Publications Wing, with particular attention to its English publications, and ultimately their engagement with the anglophone press that helped Pramukh Swami establish himself as the world leader of Svāminārāyaṇ by 1978. BAPS produced a series of new, English-language publications: books about Svāminārāyaṇ and Pramukh Swami, a monthly magazine for the western diaspora, articles in English newspapers, and they fostered relationships with anglophone academics.

Pramukh Swami enhanced his spiritual presence in the diaspora by adding new publications in multiple languages. Dadubhai’s case showed that the *Patrikā* alone was insufficient

to ensure a proper relation to the guru, so Pramukh Swami provided more mediations for devotees to focus on him. The *Patrikā* announced the publication of BAPS' first English-language book on October 14, 1974. The book, entitled *Pramukh Swami Maharaj*, told the story of the guru's life, including his recent travels and endeavors abroad. Once again, this media growth was led by diasporic devotees. This book was authored by a devotee named Ravibhai Pandya from Mombasa, Kenya. BAPS announced the publication at a devotional meeting in the UK, during Pramukh Swami's tour there. Narayan Bhagat (later called Viveksagar Swami), the great preacher of BAPS, spoke at that event and said, "this is the very first English book on [Pramukh Swami's] life that will teach those in the West about God and guru."<sup>47</sup> Pramukh Swami Maharaj himself prayed that Shastriji and Yogiji Maharaj would be pleased by this book.<sup>48</sup> The publication was, of course, intended to please the gurus, but who exactly was this book for? Was it exclusively for BAPS devotees, for all Hindus living in the UK and US, for potential converts, or the general reading public? The language of this book announcement leaves these questions open for interpretation. "Those in the West" were an ambiguous, open audience in the October 14 *Patrikā*, but they were soon to be clarified by another BAPS English publication in the same year.<sup>49</sup>

BAPS' next English publication, *The Life and Philosophy of Bhagwan Swaminarayan*, was written by Harshad Dave and initially published in Gujarati by the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan in 1967. Dave translated his work, and BAPS published the English version in London through George Allen and Unwin in 1974. BAPS announced the *Life and Philosophy* publication in the

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<sup>47</sup> *Satsaṅg Patrikā*, October 14, 1974, 2: "P. Pū. svāmīśrīnā jīvancaritrānū angrejī pustak ā sau pratham che je paścimmā mahārāj-svāmī-satpuruṣnī jāṇ karṣe."

<sup>48</sup> *Satsaṅg Patrikā*, October 14, 1974, 2.

<sup>49</sup> This ambiguity is not terribly surprising for mass mediating in a new public. For example, Michael Warner has discussed the infinite nature of the public audience: Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002). William Mazzarella has also described this unknowability as the "open edge" of a mass mediated public: William Mazzarella, *Censorium: Cinema and the Open Edge of Mass Publicity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013). Entering the English reading public, BAPS writers could not fully know who would engage with their work.

*Patrikā* on October 21, 1974, just one week after the announcement for *Pramukh Swami Maharaj*. Narayan Bhagat was quoted again in this announcement, saying *Life and Philosophy* “will go to the world’s great libraries, universities, colleges, etc.”<sup>50</sup> Herein, Narayan Bhagat signals BAPS’ intent to engage western higher education institutions with their English publications. These intentions became far more explicit in the speeches from Harshad Dave himself and a British devotee named Praful Patel at the book’s publication ceremony.

Praful Patel was a leading British BAPS devotee, an aspiring politician, and the only South Asian member of the UK’s Ugandan Resettlement Board, which oversaw the transition of almost 30,000 South Asian refugees to the UK after Idi Amin’s Asian expulsion of 1972. Patel accompanied Pramukh Swami on all of his UK tour stops in 1974 and 1977, even introducing him at the British house of parliament in 1988.<sup>51</sup> *Prakāś* reprinted his full speech at the *Life and Philosophy* ceremony on September 26, 1974 in English. Patel begins by noting that “friends of all political parties” expressed their regrets for being unable to attend the event. He also offers deep apologies to BAPS’ Jewish and Muslim friends who were unable to attend because the event fell on Rosh Hashana and the end of Eid al-Fitr.<sup>52</sup> He thanked those politicians and Christian leaders who were able to attend the event. These opening remarks are notable because they indicate BAPS explicitly considering at least two non-devotee audiences with this English publication. BAPS intended *Life and Philosophy* to address both interfaith dialogue and public political discourse in the UK.

Next, Praful Patel turns to *Life and Philosophy*, and the intention behind its publication:

Our main aim, and I speak for the author, Shri H. T. Dave and the Swaminarayan Movement, is to introduce the life and philosophy of Shree Swaminarayan to a literary and academic public outside India.

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<sup>50</sup> *Satsaṅg Patrikā*, October 21, 1974, 3: “(jagatnā mahān pustakālayo, yunivarsiṭhō, kolejo vageremā) taśe.”

<sup>51</sup> *Svāminārāyaṇ Prakāś*, May 1988, 20—21.

<sup>52</sup> *Svāminārāyaṇ Prakāś*, November 1974, 355—356.

As many of you are aware, the Swaminarayan Hindu Mission is one of the largest orthodox Hindu sects and has a very large following amongst immigrants in this country and North America. But this is the first time that a detailed presentation of the fundamental beliefs and history of the movement has appeared outside India.<sup>53</sup>

Patel makes several new important claims for BAPS in these three sentences. He claims to speak on behalf of “the Swaminarayan movement,” which was near-impossible back in India. However, as the first Svāminārāyaṇ devotees to represent the movement in this “literary and academic public” their claims could go uncontested. As Patel also mentions, BAPS had acquired the proper name to represent the movement; “the Swaminarayan Hindu Mission” was registered with the UK Charity Commission by newly arrived BAPS devotees from East Africa.<sup>54</sup> Patel also frames the assertion that Svāminārāyaṇ Hinduism is “one of the largest Orthodox Hindu sects” as a point of common knowledge. Therefore, Patel suggests, the movement that BAPS represents is establishing its naturally prominent presence within the English public.

Patel’s and Dave’s speeches repeated the claim that their book was “the first time” Svāminārāyaṇ history and theology were introduced to the “literary and academic public outside India,” although they also

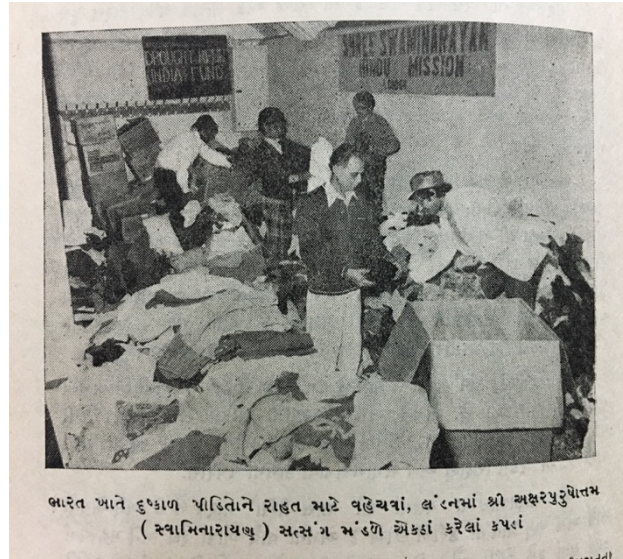


Figure 2.4: Photo of the “Shree Swaminarayan Hindu Mission” (banner, top-right) during charity work in London, printed in Svāminārāyaṇ Prakāś, January 1975. Published back in India, Prakāś’s own caption describes their “Mission” as the “Shree Aksharpurushottam (Svāminārāyaṇ) Satsaṅg Mandāḷ” instead of its registered British name.

<sup>53</sup> Svāminārāyaṇ Prakāś, November 1974, 356.

<sup>54</sup> The Swaminarayan Hindu Mission (no. 273425) was later renamed as the Sarjudas Foundation, which reported just under £12 million of income and £30 million of assets in 2016, according to the UK Charity Commission’s website, accessed September 19, 2018,

<http://apps.charitycommission.gov.uk/ShowCharity/RegisterOfCharities/CharityWithPartB.aspx?RegisteredCharityNumber=273425&SubsidiaryNumber=0>.

recognized that this was not quite true. Both speakers made reference to the long, colonial history of British-Indian discourse and the previous Anglophone accounts of Bhagvān Svāminārāyaṇ from missionaries, colonial hands, and anthropologists since his own lifetime.<sup>55</sup> What *was* new here: the so-called “Swaminarayan Hindu Mission” had not existed before 1970, and certainly not with BAPS at its helm. With both its publications and non-profit registration, BAPS developed new claims of Svāminārāyaṇ leadership. By establishing a new set of facts in the British public, their spokesmen were able to recenter the Svāminārāyaṇ movement around BAPS, its publications, and its guru.

Pramukh Swami’s divine presence is also assigned an influential role in the discourse of this public. Later in his *Life and Philosophy* speech, Praful Patel describes Pramukh Swami as “the spiritual leader of the Swaminarayan movement,” which, again, was a newly emboldened claim in 1974.<sup>56</sup> Under this title, Pramukh Swami’s message, conveyed by Patel, calls for a broader, pan-Hindu council in the UK:

it is the wish of Shree Pramukh Swami that there should be a Joint Council of Hindus in the UK to coordinate and properly represent the various Hindu sects in this country and that it should have friendly relationships and consultations with other religious organizations in the host community. This book is the first step towards this desirable aim and should help to promote good race relations [and] good citizenship.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> For example, Praful Patel thanks David Pocock of Sussex University for his ethnography of religion in Gujarat that describes the Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy: *Svāminārāyaṇ Prakāś*, November 1974, 357. Harshad Dave mentions several early scholarly accounts of the Sampradāy, including Monier Monier-Williams’ and Max Müller’s, as well as colonial accounts like Henry George Briggs’ (1849) *Cities of Gujarashtra*, and Pryn Hopkins (1939) *Character and Personality: Svāminārāyaṇ Prakāś*, November 1974, 358—360.

<sup>56</sup> *Svāminārāyaṇ Prakāś*, November 1974, 357. The Svāminārāyaṇ Ācāryas of Ahmedabad and Vadtal would not, and did not, allow this language to go unchecked in India. According to the Ahmedabad Ācārya, when BAPS later took out advertisements in the *Times of India* that also referred to Pramukh Swami as the “leader of Swaminarayans,” his temple threatened the *Times* editor with litigation if they printed that language again.

<sup>57</sup> *Svāminārāyaṇ Prakāś*, November 1974, 358.

BAPS presented *Life and Philosophy* as a first step for Pramukh Swami to lead a pan-Hindu media strategy in the UK. Patel also mentions that Hindu practices seem “exotic and strange” to the English; this book and council could therefore counter the dual hazards of 1) public and inter-religious “misunderstanding” of Hinduism, and 2) over-assimilated Hindus, or “brown Britons,” who forget their traditions.<sup>58</sup> In 1974, BAPS was able to claim Svāminārāyaṇ leadership in the British Hindu diaspora and address their media to multiple audiences: the western academy, national political discourse, inter-religious dialogue, and the pan-Hindu diasporic community. However, as far as we know, Pramukh Swami’s vision of a Joint Hindu Council in England never came to fruition.<sup>59</sup>

In the following years, BAPS increased its capacity for English-language publications. In 1975, BAPS Publications shifted from Mumbai to their Shahibaug-neighborhood temple in Ahmedabad, where land was more affordable for a press building. Three years later, Ishwar Swami established the English Publications Wing within the Swaminarayan Aksharpath (Press). In addition to Dave’s book, the English Publications Wing was tasked with translating scriptures and other devotional literature for the diasporic Gujarati youth who primarily spoke English. BAPS sādhus who currently work under Ishwar Swami explain the founding of English Publications as a simple response to the needs of Anglophone devotees abroad. They eschew portrayals of the English Publications actively expanding the satsaṅg abroad or engaging outside readers. One sādhu put it succinctly in 2018, saying “No, there isn’t any[thing] for the public. It’s all for the devotees. We’ve never advertised our publications in any public way.” However, BAPS spokesmen in the

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<sup>58</sup> *Svāminārāyaṇ Prakāś*, November 1974, 356—357.

<sup>59</sup> BAPS did however participate in Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) activities in the following years, as shown in *Svāminārāyaṇ Prakāś*, September 1984, inside front cover; and *Svāminārāyaṇ Prakāś*, May 1988, 35. The VHP’s founder, Swami Chinmayananda also attended some BAPS events, as shown in *Svāminārāyaṇ Prakāś*, September 1974, 245—246; and *Satsaṅg Patrikā*, July 20, 1970, 1.

1970s, like Dave and Patel, were explicitly interested in engaging, even regulating the representation of Hinduism in the English-reading public.

Some of the English Publications Wing's projects were catered to the younger generation in the Western diaspora. In the mid-1970s, a handful of young, English-speaking BAPS devotees from East Africa and London took initiation as sādhus. They were educated at the Shahibaug temple in both Eastern and Western philosophy, and in 1978 this sādhu cohort became the staff of the BAPS English Publications Wing. Their flagship publication was a quarterly magazine called *Swaminarayan Bliss*, and the first issue in April 1978 explained its purpose. "Why a journal in English? [...] Our civilization has almost reached its zenith [...] but it has given rise to [a] new form of pollution, namely, the pollution of the spirit."<sup>60</sup> The writers warned that new technology and comfortable lifestyles could become material attachments that degrade the soul. Just as Shastriji Maharaj had with *Prakāś* in 1938, Pramukh Swami also dedicated the inaugural 1978 *Bliss* with a letter, which was hand-written in Gujarati and translated in English. From his letter, it is clear that Pramukh Swami imagined the *Bliss* audience as the English-speaking Gujarati youth abroad: "the religious knowledge shall be gained by the children and youths residing abroad," and "all the children and youths abroad should avail of this Quarterly English magazine and read it regularly."<sup>61</sup> In this sense, *Swaminarayan Bliss* was produced by and for diasporic devotees. Most of the magazine's sādhu writers were born and raised in East Africa, and they imagined their audience as the American and British diasporas.<sup>62</sup>

In addition to BAPS' internal publications, English-language newspapers were an increasingly permissive forum for BAPS to identify as Svāminārāyaṇ in the 1970s. In India and

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<sup>60</sup> *Swaminarayan Bliss*, April 1978, 1.

<sup>61</sup> *Swaminarayan Bliss*, April 1978, 3.

<sup>62</sup> There were some exceptions to this rule. Sadhu Atmaswarupdas from Mumbai was one of the original *Bliss* writers, and English-speaking devotees in India also subscribed to *Swaminarayan Bliss* from the very beginning.

abroad, BAPS increased its public media presence by placing announcements and advertisements in *The Times of India* and myriad newspapers of the foreign press. BAPS announcements in the *Times* began under Yogiji Maharaj after his 1970 visit to the UK. BAPS held a reception for Yogiji on his return to Mumbai and ran a quarter-page advertisement in the *Times* on June 22, 1970. The top of the ad reads “Welcome to H.S.D.H Yogiji Maharaj” and features his photo. The ad’s text, though, gives a BAPS-centric synopsis of Svāminārāyaṇ history from the founder through the current moment of spreading the dharma “throughout Africa, Europe, America and other countries.”<sup>63</sup> One of Yogiji’s 1970s tour stops in London also received a write-up in the *Times*,<sup>64</sup> and they ran a brief announcement for his death on January 24, 1971.<sup>65</sup> Yogiji’s newspaper presence was limited, but BAPS used this press to spread its sectarian view of the Sampradāy.

In the 1970s, the *Patrikā* ran announcements when Yogiji Maharaj and then Pramukh Swami Maharaj appeared in the press and encouraged devotees to read the coverage. Yogiji appeared in newspapers like the British Gujarati diasporic publication *Garvi Gujarat* (Proud Gujarat) and mainstream British papers like *The Guardian* and *News of the World*.<sup>66</sup> When Pramukh Swami began his first world tour in 1974, the *Patrikā* gave news from London, encouraging devotees to listen for BBC radio coverage and noting that reporters met the guru when his plane landed at Heathrow.<sup>67</sup> On Pramukh Swami’s second world tour, *The Times of India* announced his plane departure for London on June 6, 1977. The *Times* reported Pramukh Swami planned to open a “Swami Narayan Temple” in New York and referred to him as “the spiritual head of the Akshar Purushottam (Swaminarayan) movement.”<sup>68</sup> The *Patrikā* also noted the press

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<sup>63</sup> “Classified Ad 19,” *Times of India*, Jun. 22, 1970, 3.

<sup>64</sup> JP Singh, “A saint from the land of India,” *Times of India*, Jun. 15, 1970, 9.

<sup>65</sup> Staff Reporter, “Yogiji Maharaj Dead,” *Times of India*, Jan. 24, 1971, 5.

<sup>66</sup> *Satsaṅg Patrikā*, June 29, 1970; *Satsaṅg Patrikā*, August 23, 1970; *Satsaṅg Patrikā*, September 7, 1970.

<sup>67</sup> *Satsaṅg Patrikā*, July 1, 1974.

<sup>68</sup> Staff Reporter, “Swami Narayan Temple too for US,” *Times of India*, Jun. 6, 1977, 9.

coverage of his plane landing on June 13, 1977, and the English radio coverage of his arrival was reprinted, both in English and Gujarati.<sup>69</sup> With every step of his world tour, Pramukh Swami's engagement with the press put BAPS in the newspapers and shored up its standing as "Svāminārāyaṇ."<sup>70</sup>

Coverage of the guru's travel, foreign and domestic, was always a mainstay of *Prakāś* issues since its inaugural issue in 1938. Shastriji Maharaj never left India, but Yogiji traveled to East Africa several times and visited London once, in 1970. However, under Pramukh Swami, world tour (viśva yātrā) coverage gained new prominence in *Prakāś*. His first two world tours in 1974 and 1977—78 set a mold of the globe-trotting guru, which BAPS media has reproduced for the next forty years, up through the present. Pramukh Swami's personal presence in the lives of devotees was made both closer and farther away in his world tours. *Prakāś* showed Pramukh Swami to be newly proximate and accessible to devotees in the US and UK. In 1974, a guru travelling in the global West was unprecedented for the Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy, and still uncommon for Hindu leaders generally. By the same token, BAPS devotees in India, especially those in rural Gujarat, saw these same photos of Pramukh Swami in distant, exotic locales like Cincinnati, Ohio and Niagara Falls. The guru had never been farther away. With maps of his world tours, field reports from American cities, and photomontages of the guru with international dignitaries, 1970s *Prakāś* made Pramukh Swami into a global guru superstar.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> *Satsaṅg Patrikā*, June 13, 1977.

<sup>70</sup> In January 1978, Pramukh Swami's return to India was also reported in the *Times*. At his reception in Mumbai, an LP record of devotion songs, kīrtans, was released: Staff Reporter, "City Reception to Pramukh Swami," *Times of India*, Jan. 30, 1978, 3.

<sup>71</sup> See for example, among others, the *Svāminārāyaṇ Prakāś* issues from July 1974, with photos of Pramukh Swami deplaning; September 1974, with photos of Pramukh Swami in New York; October 1974, with photos around London; November-December 1977, with photos from Niagara Falls and Toronto; January 1978, with a letter from the Mayor of Cincinnati.

BAPS used foreign publicity, like Figure 2.1 from February 1978, to show Pramukh Swami making breaking news around the world.<sup>72</sup> Pramukh Swami visited New York for the first time in 1974 and established the first BAPS temple in a Queens (Flushing) house.<sup>73</sup> He also gave a televised interview on Philadelphia local news, which *Prakās* translated to Gujarati and reprinted in excerpts. For example, the interviewer asked, “What was your experience of New York and Cincinnati?” With Harshad Dave as his translator, Pramukh Swami answered, “I’m happy seeing the work. I’m happy seeing people live by the rules, but so many vices are growing.”<sup>74</sup> Throughout his life, Pramukh Swami often expressed appreciation for orderliness, people following the rules, but also his criticism for the materialism of consumerist lifestyles of Americans. The Philadelphia interviewer also asked him, “Why do you order celibacy so strictly?” Pramukh Swami answered, “It is Svāminārāyaṇ’s command that sādhus should stay detached from women, wealth, and all, and God is pleased with those who do. So we live accordingly.”<sup>75</sup> The answers themselves would have been nothing new for BAPS readers, but the format of a televised news interview in America gave new medium to old messages, perhaps the first time the word “Svāminārāyaṇ” was ever uttered on American television. The Philadelphia TV appearance itself elevated Pramukh Swami, reaffirmed his consistent teachings, and exhibited his praise of Svāminārāyaṇ. As with Harshad Dave and Praful Patel’s engagement with the British reading public, Pramukh Swami’s American press coverage elevated him to represent the Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy as its first and natural spokesman. It goes without saying that the Philadelphia TV interviewer did not challenge BAPS’

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<sup>72</sup> For more press coverage, see also the *Svāminārāyaṇ Prakās* issues from September 1974, August 1977, October 1977, November-December 1977.

<sup>73</sup> For photos of the house in Queens, mūrti pratiṣṭa ceremony, and Pramukh Swami with special guest Swami Chinmayananda, VHP founder, see *Svāminārāyaṇ Prakās* September 1974.

<sup>74</sup> *Svāminārāyaṇ Prakās*, September 1974, 249: “Preśna: ‘nyū york,’ sīnsīnāṭī jōī āpne kevo anubhav thayo?’ Uttar: ‘kārya’ jōī ānand thāy che. Nīti pramāṇe jive che tethī ānand paṇ keṭlāk dūṣaṇo vadhu che.”

<sup>75</sup> *Svāminārāyaṇ Prakās*, September 1974, 249: “Preśna: ‘brahmacaryanā ādeśmā āṭlū kaḍak sā māṭe?’ Uttar: ‘Svāminārāyaṇ bhagvāṇno ādeś che ke sādhuē strī-dhanno sarvathā tyāg rākhuo, je rākhe che tenā par bhagvānī prasantā thāy che. Te pramāṇe ame jīvīe chīe.”

stringent enforcement of gender segregation or his sectarian claim to represent “what Svāminārāyaṇ taught.” Pramukh Swami’s answers would have been untenable in the Mumbai press of 1938, but the Philadelphia press of 1974 allowed him to make these claims without contestation.

*Svāminārāyaṇ Prakāś* also used world tour coverage to compare “Eastern” and “Western” culture, as well as Hindu Dharma and Christianity, electing Pramukh Swami as spokesman for Svāminārāyaṇs, Hindus, and “The East.” During Pramukh Swami’s 1974 tour, a *Prakāś* series called “Ask and Think” pondered questions like “Why is the number of Hindus so small when Hindu Dharma is so good?” and “Why don’t Hindu sādhus give service (sevā) like Christian missionaries?”<sup>76</sup> The article encouraged Hindu communities to spread abroad and told readers that BAPS sādhus *are* working in the West like Christians did in the East. This question-answer article ran alongside photos of Pramukh Swami meeting Christian leaders in the UK. Then in 1977, Pramukh Swami’s American tour was covered by a monthly *Prakāś* article entitled “Light of the East Spreading in the West.”<sup>77</sup> The American tour stops elicited frequent emphasis on “East-vs-West” cultural comparisons, and BAPS cast their guru as the one, global leader to bridge the cultural gap for Hindus abroad.

BAPS publications in the 1970s transformed Pramukh Swami into a transnational guru with an appeal capable of connecting with all Hindus. Of course, many global gurus had similar ambitions in the 1970s, many of them from Bengali backgrounds who also spoke English. Pramukh Swami chiefly spoke Gujarati, with rudimentary Hindi, which limited but also concentrated his charismatic appeal within the Gujarati diaspora. The combination of the guru’s

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<sup>76</sup> “Pūcho ane Vicāro,” *Svāminārāyaṇ Prakāś*, August 1974, 211—212: “Hindu dharma sāro hovā chatā emā saṅkhyā ochī kem che?” [...] “Khrīstī miśanarīo jevī sevā hindu sādhu kem nathī āptā?”

<sup>77</sup> Harshad Dave, “paścimmā pūrvanā prakāśnū pātharñū,” *Svāminārāyaṇ Prakāś*, September 1977, 365—370.

inability to speak English with BAPS' anglophone publications created a close distance between him and the younger generation of the Gujarati diaspora. Pramukh Swami was utterly removed from their daily lives and yet accessible through his tours, translators, and texts. As Gujarati emigration outpaced other Indian ethnic groups, Pramukh Swami's devotional base would only grow in the following decades. He was perfectly positioned to assume spiritual leadership, if not over the Hindu diaspora, then certainly over the growing Svāminārāyaṇ diaspora.

1978 was the moment when Pramukh Swami and BAPS envisioned a new role for themselves as leaders of the Hindu diaspora. Consider Figure 2.5, the cover of *Svāminārāyaṇ Prakāś* from March 1978, the very next

issue after Figure 2.1, the February *Prakāś* cover which opened this chapter. In March 1978, Pramukh Swami returned to India from his second world

tour. The March *Prakāś* cover clips and pastes his image atop the globe; his feet stand near the American West Coast, and his head rests next to the sun. This *Prakāś* cover makes Pramukh Swami likewise radiant. Pramukh Swami's eyes are cast East, and his feet are placed on a latitudinal line leading straight back to Gujarat. His hands are folded in a greeting to devotees. A massive flower



Figure 2.5: Pramukh Swami on top of the world. *Svāminārāyaṇ Prakāś* (cover) March 1978, covering the final leg of his world tour and return to India.

garland hangs from his neck down past his feet, representing the many honors he received along his tour. In this cover image, and in the eyes of BAPS devotees welcoming him back to Gujarat, Pramukh Swami became larger than life, a transnational entity. The guru achieved an unprecedented level of foreign press coverage and international fame. He raised theretofore impossible amounts of money for BAPS and established the first “Swami Narayan temple” in New York City. His achievements marked the beginning of a second life for BAPS outside of India.

*Conclusion: Guru Presence in Transnational Print*

This chapter has argued that the guru’s transnational presence in print made BAPS a leader of the Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy and the Gujarati diaspora. Over the course of four decades, from 1938 to 1978, BAPS transformed itself from a marginal off-shoot of the Svāminārāyaṇ movement to its global representative. When BAPS began publishing *Svāminārāyaṇ Prakāś* in 1938, neither newspaper reports nor court decisions recognized them as part of the “Swaminarayan religion.” The Ahmedabad and Vadtal Ācāryas’ authority inhibited their growth within Gujarat, forcing BAPS to develop new methods for the guru to reach followers. In 1956, Yogiji’s *Satsaṅg Patrikā* first delivered the guru’s personal updates and instructions for weekly practice to groups of devotees in India and abroad, priming devotees to perceive the guru’s divine presence in the printed word. The *Patrikā*’s popularity in East Africa drove BAPS’ growth outside India while facilitating bureaucratic management of the volunteer-run mandāḷs and formalizing devotees’ mass-mediated relationship with the guru. Pramukh Swami built upon the *Patrikā*’s success in the 1970s, enhancing his and BAPS’ presence in the English reading public with the English Publications Department, a new magazine, books, and extensive coverage in the press. The speed and frequency of BAPS’ publishing circumvented the Ācārya’s authority and established Pramukh Swami as the first and foremost Svāminārāyaṇ leader in the United Kingdom and the United States.

These print mediations rendered the BAPS gurus spiritually omnipresent around their transnational network. Starting with the *Satsaṅg Patrikā*, paper media brought the guru's words into each small devotional group, no matter how remote, and guided their worship. The newsletter delivered the guru's preaching every week, which sustained his connection with devotees over the long periods of his physical absence. Devotees could also sense the guru's happiness in print; Yogiji told devotees in writing when they pleased him and when they upset him. The guru's printed presence also made a transnational scale of BAPS institutionally feasible for the first time. Devotees in East Africa enthusiastically responded to the guru's newsletter by constantly writing back letters and attendance reports. Their diasporic experience of the guru's presence in print would soon become the norm for all devotees in a rapidly expanding BAPS. Later, Pramukh Swami realized the potential of foreign publicity to establish his divine presence abroad and expand his audience. Coverage of Pramukh Swami's world tours, both in BAPS publications and in the press, created the persona of a globe-trotting guru visiting devotees in every corner of the world. The BAPS guru extended his reach to the Western diaspora and made himself newly accessible to English-speaking devotees.


BAPS' development in the diaspora eventually returned to impact the Svāminārāyaṇ community in Gujarat as well. Pramukh Swami became an authority of the Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy through his engagement with the public outside of India. He countered the Ācāryas' territorial authority within Gujarat with new diasporic power to circulate media internationally. When Pramukh Swami returned to Gujarat in 1978, he did so as a spiritual leader with the backing of a large community of Gujaratis. After 1978, as the next chapter demonstrates, Indian newspapers also began describing Pramukh Swami as "the leader of the Swaminarayan movement." BAPS sought to maintain its new status by training sādhus and volunteers to continue

working with the press, routinizing Pramukh Swami's success for years to come. In the next chapter, I turn to BAPS' later engagement with the press in Gujarat and explore how the work of press management and public relations were institutionalized as forms of devotional service, *sevā*, in 1981.


Through this publicity *sevā*, the BAPS guru gained further popular recognition as a holy figure and eventually exercised his public spiritual authority in India's national and international politics. The guru established a new persona in Gujarat through BAPS institutions that trained devotees to embody his message and affect positive press coverage. BAPS established a new bureaucracy of *sevā* departments that enabled the guru's regular, persistent, and professional contact with reporters, news editors, and VIPs. Directed by their departments, *sevaks* experience the guru's divine will at play in their media work, and they express a desire to "become an instrument" of his expansive agency. Successfully harnessing these devotional desires in service of the institutional guru, BAPS scaled up the sacred leader to become a figure of historic national importance in India and an ambassador of Hinduism worldwide.

# SWAMINARAYAN BICENTENARY CELEBRATIONS

1781  
1981



**SHREE SWAMINARAYAN  
DOYEN OF PEACE**



SHREE SWAMINARAYAN

If you have not heard of Shree Swaminarayan, it is because we have been too busy doing his work to talk about him. However, this is the time to introduce him, since we are celebrating his 200th Birth Anniversary.

He was born in Chhapaya in U. P. He travelled bare-footed throughout India for seven years and settled in Gujarat. His master, Ramanand Swami, found in him his ideal, much awaited successor. He asked of his master two-boons: "Grant thou that your followers suffer not what I may suffer for them. Grant also that they never suffer from want of food and clothing, let that be my lot instead." His compassion for humanity was boundless.

His heart reached out to the suffering poor. Healing, helping people out of chasms of despair, he was always ready to help the distressed even at great personal risks.

He met the lowly and the lost, the poor and the downtrodden. He opened their hearts and released the soul force through his tender love, vivid and personal. This was the weapon he used in all the peaceful battles he waged against ignorance, superstition, vice, addiction, inequality, cruelty, grossness, sin, Sati prathe, female infanticide, and the dowry system. Thus he repaired the shattered fabric of social organisation.

This is a living memory descended through a few generations and well-recorded in letters and poems, sermons and scriptures, art and architecture, music and monuments, and most authentically, in the disciplined band of 'Sadhus' who have scrupulously guarded glorious Indian traditions. The sadhus have been in the vanguard for they observe absolute celibacy and total abstinence from wealth. They are the selfless, savans of society.

His reverence for life extended to man, animals, insects and even plants. Non-violence was his creed.

He had a mass base but not a gross one.

In comradeship, the devotees extended helping hands and willingly shared their gains and wealth, comforts, abilities and above all, the spirit which they had strengthened with struggles. The loyalty, faith and devotion of the followers in response to his deep love and solicitude forms the essence of spiritual nourishment.

He came, he saw and he conquered the hearts of 20 lakh devotees. Fiercely warlords, ruthless chieftains, prostitutes, dacoits, degenerates—all found in him a personal, glowing, living godhead.

"None would miss me hereafter" was the warmest utterance that he made to mankind. Accordingly, the tradition of selfless service and involvement which he heralded is still alive today. We are sure you will be surprised, pleasantly so, to discover an energetic, happy Satsang even to-day.

One cannot but wonder in awe that this renaissance came to bloom at a time when chaos, terror and strife prevailed.

He is as relevant today as he was then more so considering the trauma and shock that modern society imposes on its members.


**'THE ASCENT OF MAN'**

We cannot always build a future for our children, but we can build our children for the future. We plan from the very grassroots level, for, we believe that children are the soul of to-morrow's society.

A happy and well brought-up child to-day, a sensible and balanced adult tomorrow. The children of our Bal-Mandals meet every Sunday. They begin with a prayer, bhajans, story sessions and end the day with prasad.

We also provide them ample opportunity for expressing their talents.

There are 300 centres collectively in India and abroad.




**PRAMUKH SWAMI  
(THE PRESENT LEADER)**

He does not work miracles but meeting him might help you work some with your own life.

**'SOLACE TO THE DISTRESSED'**

The 5-year programme of Bicentenary Celebrations marked the onset of humanistic revival. As a part of selfless service and fostering of universal brotherhood for social 'development' and self-improvement, 1500 youths had rushed to the rescue of the flood-hit city of Morbi in 1979. To promote inter-racial amity, 5000 Muslims were provided a sumptuous meal during the flood-stricken days of Ramzan Idd in Morbi by our organisation, which transcends narrow caste and sectarian barriers.

Education is cared for and so is health. The very life flowing in our veins, the lustre in our eyes, and the health of our teeth are restored through the organisation of Blood Donation Camps, Eye Camps and Dental Camps respectively. The Red Cross commended the organisation for a record donation of blood in 1976 and for being the first spiritual movement to promote blood donation.



**'SELFLESS LOVE SUCCEEDS WHERE LEGISLATION FAILS'**

Advaitis or the affluent, we work with equal amount of zeal. In the process of effecting a healthy social change a spirit in addition to legislation is wanted. And that is provided by our religious leaders.


His Holiness Shri Pramukh Swami is one of them.

He and his saints work with selflessness, and the results are reassuring.

Several hundred people have been freed from fetters of addictions, superstitions and vices.

Cottage industries and adult education classes have also been opened in Advaiti areas.

All this for the greater good of society.



**PRAMUKH SWAMI—A FRIEND INDEED**

At 60 he possesses the energy and drive of a man half his age—a veritable human dynamo that never slows down making inroads into remote villages and meeting the masses. Neither age nor ill-health has reduced the tempo of his zeal. He is the very epicentre that keeps the Swaminarayan Movement geared and going.

You will never find him distant. Unavailable or yourself rudely cordoned off. He moves with us, as one of us, but several steps ahead. Not for a moment does his special, person-to-person touch falter. He is the very backbone of the Satsang.

He has added life and verve to religion eliminating superfluous abstractions and identifying it with the common man by practising it himself.

Armed with the grace of God, with a human concern for Dharma, undaunted by the passionate criticism of uninformed men, undeterred by the vicissitudes of popularity, he has walked, a pilgrim of Dharma.

If ever you need a true friend, come, meet him. One look into those benign eyes and you will be enraptured. He will listen patiently to you and your story, be it one of sorrow or a joyous announcement. He will advise, gently, firmly and soundly.

He carries aloft the cherished ideals of all religions:

"Assimilation, not destruction." "Help, not fight." "Harmony, not dissension."

Contact : Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Sanstha Shahibag Rd; Ahmedabad-4. President : Pramukh Swami Maharaj.

Figure 3.1: "Swaminarayan Bicentenary Celebrations," Times of India, Apr. 12, 1981, 12.

### Advertising Darśan

Since 1981, BAPS has institutionalized publicity work as a form of devotional service (sevā) for the guru. BAPS leaders frame the work of Public Relations and publishing within a spiritual discourse of pleasing the guru (gurunā rājīpo). Devotees are instructed to please the guru by improving his and his organization's public image. Their work transfers popular Hindu and Svāminārāyan theology of sacred image (mūrti) and sacred sight (darśan) into the commercial space of advertising in the Western Indian press. In the BAPS interpretation of Svāminārāyan theology, the guru is understood as God's personified form (brahmasvarūpa); his body is where

Bhagvān Svāminārāyaṇ descends into our material world and remains present (pragaṭ), for all humankind.<sup>1</sup> BAPS installs images of its gurus as mūrtis and devotees venerate the images through ritual darśan, in temples worldwide. Devotees adorn the guru and his images with decoration as a visual expression of an idealized devotion for God, what Cynthia Packert calls a “bhakti visuality.”<sup>2</sup> But what happens when images of the guru circulate outside the temple and inside commodified media, for example, in newspaper advertisements? This chapter analyzes publicity work as sevā, a spiritually satisfying form of devotional practice that followers use to please their guru, and which, I suggest, enhances his religious authority in the process. I argue that the commercial work of publicity sevā does more to bolster the guru’s divinity than undermine it by transferring a bhakti visuality from within BAPS to the national Indian public.

BAPS’ systematic approach to religious publicity has brought the guru consistently positive press coverage for decades, which has elevated his public religious status and enhanced his perceived spiritual powers. While the previous chapter explained how BAPS became Svāminārāyaṇ abroad through Pramukh Swami’s anglophone publicity in the 1970s, this chapter follows BAPS’ institutionalization of publicity work as sevā inside India beginning in 1981. The institutionalized and decades-long practice of publicity sevā affects popular understanding of the

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<sup>1</sup> See Sadhu Paramattvadas, *Introduction to Swaminarayan Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); also Diana L. Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (Chambersburg, PA: Anima Books, 1981). In the Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy, there are many popular *gurus* who claim this type of direct, divine connection to Bhagvān Svāminārāyaṇ. During fieldwork in the Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy of 2018, I met four gurus and three ācāryas. All of these Svāminārāyaṇ leaders claimed Bhagvān Svāminārāyaṇ as their spiritual inspiration, and many of their respective devotees cast aspersions on the spiritual claims of the other gurus and ācāryas. This chapter focuses on the publicity sevā of Indian BAPS, but similar sevā is occasionally found in other Indian Svāminārāyaṇ groups, in the service of pleasing other gurus. On this count, BAPS is theologically consistent with several others in the Sampradāy; however, it is unique in its institutionalization of sevā departments and their systematic approach to publicity sevā.

<sup>2</sup> Cynthia Packert, “From Gujarat to the Globe: ‘Bhakti Visuality’ and Identity in BAPS Svāminārāyaṇ Hinduism,” *The Journal of Hindu Studies* 12, Issue 2 (August 2019): 192–223. Also, Amy-Ruth Holt and Karen Pechilis, “Contemporary Images of Hindu *Bhakti*: Identity and Visuality,” *The Journal of Hindu Studies* 12, Issue 2 (August 2019), 129–141, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jhs/hiz007>.

Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy and BAPS today. Here, I take guru publicity seriously as popular theological discourse adapted for a mass audience. I connect guru publicity with anthropological studies of advertising and image-commodification through an ethnographic exploration of the devotees' work in contemporary BAPS. The 1980s gave rise to a massive volunteer infrastructure in BAPS, creating new departments to handle various logistics of mass gatherings: parking, crowd control, tour guides, women's activities, food and catering, grounds sanitation, videography, and photography. Within this volunteer infrastructure, two particular departments—the Press Department and the Public Relations Department—were created to train and assign sevaks (devotee workers) to any number of tasks that could improve BAPS and the guru's public image.<sup>3</sup> I analyze the systems of Press sevā, PR sevā, their renunciant leaders, and householding sevaks, collectively as “publicity sevā.”

Consider Figure 3.1; BAPS Press sevaks paid for this “Swaminarayan Bicentenary Celebrations” advertisement to be printed in Mumbai's *Times of India* two weeks before their April 1981 Celebration marking the 200<sup>th</sup> birthday of Sahajānand Svāmī, aka Bhagvān Svāminārāyaṇ. In the 1980s, BAPS began articulating its mass media work in relation to the “mass” appeal of Bhagvān Svāminārāyaṇ, as their *Times* ad says: “He came, he saw and he conquered the hearts of 20 lakh [two million] devotees” [...] “He had a mass base, but not a gross one.” The “gross” quality is a common Svāminārāyaṇ descriptor of anything physical and ultimately illusory (māyik). Such distinctions—mass, but not gross—enable BAPS to showcase their movement's transnational demographic expansion while maintaining that its true value is divine, eternal, and otherworldly. Inside BAPS, these discursive distinctions also authorize the work of BAPS publicity sevaks, who

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<sup>3</sup> BAPS devotees themselves describe the work in these departments as “PR sevā” and “Press sevā,” respectively. I combine the PR and Press departments and analyze their collective work as “publicity sevā,” which is my own term.

see their work as commercial but fundamentally different from capitalist, consumer-driven advertising. Household BAPS sevaks embrace of the commercial dimension of publicity to create a degree of separation between the sādhus and financial issues, thus allowing them to remain pure and detached.

What theology happens in Figure 3.1? First, BAPS lays claim to the spiritual legacy of Bhagvān Svāminārāyaṇ. As this *Times* advertisement begins, “If you have not heard of Shree Swaminarayan, it is because we have been too busy doing his work to talk about him. However, this is the time to introduce him.”<sup>4</sup> Their clever framing positions BAPS as the natural spokesmen for all Svāminārāyaṇ devotees and reframes their new publicity as only necessary for their devotional stewardship of his legacy and following. This 1981 *Times* ad was not the first time BAPS entered the sphere of Mumbai’s mass mediation, but the 1981 Bicentenary Celebration began a trend of increasing publicity and public claims to Svāminārāyaṇ leadership within India.<sup>5</sup> The new Press and Public Relations Departments created this trend through their increased institutional capacity to manage BAPS’ public image. Their new publicity sevaks enabled BAPS to reproduce its diasporic claims of Svāminārāyaṇ leadership with greater consistency in India.

Another theological development in this 1981 advertisement is the creation of a new guru persona in the press. Pramukh Swami’s charismatic, spiritual power to connect with the common man is realized by the ad’s very circulation. The ad introduces Pramukh Swami as a divine, modern guru and a friend to all mankind; “If you ever need a true friend, come, meet him. One look into those benign eyes, and you will be enraptured. He will listen patiently to you and your story, be it one of sorrow or a joyous announcement. He will advise, gently, firmly and soundly.”<sup>6</sup> More

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<sup>4</sup> “Swaminarayan Bicentenary Celebration,” *Times of India*, Apr. 12, 1981, 12.

<sup>5</sup> Before 1981, BAPS ran occasional newspaper advertisements for events at their Mumbai temple and for Pramukh Swami’s world tours in 1974 and 1977—’78.

<sup>6</sup> “Swaminarayan Bicentenary Celebration,” *Times of India*, Apr. 12, 1981, 12.

accessible than your traditional *guru*, living a solitary life in the mountains, Pramukh Swami appears as a socially engaged and compassionate mentor who understands you, your story, and your problems. In order to meet such a true friend, the *Times* ad instructs readers to attend BAPS' upcoming Bicentenary Celebration, which is free and open to the public. Gandhi understood his publicity's efficacy in summoning crowds as a result of his brahmacharya discipline.<sup>7</sup> BAPS media workers likewise explain the popularity of their festivals as powered by Pramukh Swami's divine connection to Bhagvān Svāminārāyaṇ. On this count, the 1981 *Times* ad gives Pramukh Swami a demure caption: "He does not work miracles, but meeting him might help you work some with your own life."<sup>8</sup> The advertisement avoids portraying the guru as a magician in favor of the guru as a pastoral counselor, ready to bring transformative therapeutic care to your life. The masses met Pramukh Swami in the 1980s and '90s through his publicity and festivals.

This chapter explores the life and effects of devotional publicity work in three sections. The first section tells the story of one leading Press Department volunteer in Ahmedabad, called Aakash, who casts light on how publicity work is spiritually fulfilling for BAPS devotees. The second section explores the cozy relationship between BAPS and the Gujarati Press and how their media representation shapes public perception of the Svāminārāyaṇ movement. Finally, the third section describes how Gujarati and foreign publicity helped Pramukh Swami, and later the entire institution of BAPS, play a role in Indian foreign relations and reach the status of Hindu ambassadors to the world.

### *Press Sevā in 1981*

Devotees who perform Press sevā understand themselves as recipients of the guru's spiritual blessings, but I argue their work also bolsters the guru's very status as divine. Aakash

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<sup>7</sup> See William Mazzarella, "Branding the Mahatma: The Untimely Provocation of Gandhian Publicity," *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 1 (2010): 1–39.

<sup>8</sup> "Swaminarayan Bicentenary Celebration," *Times of India*, Apr. 12, 1981, 12.

Bhatt was an original member of the BAPS Press Department in 1981. The department was created in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, to help with preparations for BAPS’ planned Bicentenary Celebration. He finished his MBA in the same year, and BAPS sādhus called him to Press sevā. After 1981, Aakash continued serving in the Press Department for decades, eventually becoming one of its leaders. Over the years, Aakash has performed every odd job the Press Department required: distributing press releases to Ahmedabad news offices, handling questions from reporters, purchasing ad space, and giving interviews to interested academics. Beginning in Ahmedabad, BAPS press departments have spread to all major temples around Gujarat, India, and later abroad. Today, Aakash collaborates with and supports BAPS Press Departments in other Indian cities. However, as is characteristic of BAPS sevaks, he minimizes the impact of his personal sevā, saying he is “nothing but a brand ambassador.” Even in his self-deprecation, Aakash implicitly recognizes the performative role he plays in maintaining BAPS’ brand and public image.

As one of the Press Department’s longest-serving sevaks and an old-hand interviewee, Aakash knows how to handle himself while speaking and working with interested observers. When we spoke at his office in 2018, Aakash sat comfortably at his desk, unperturbed by probing questions, even on more sensitive issues. A male office assistant served us tea, snacks and took smartphone photos of our conversation. We spoke for an hour, mostly in English, with recourse to the occasional Gujarati idiom. When I first sat down, across the desk from Aakash, I remarked on his beautiful view of Sardar Patel Stadium, one of Ahmedabad’s major landmarks that was since renamed as Narendra Modi Stadium.<sup>9</sup> But as we spoke, Aakash was focused on another image. Behind me—directly over my head from Aakash’s perspective—a large portrait of Pramukh

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<sup>9</sup> “Motera Stadium renamed Narendra Modi Stadium as President Ram Nath Kovind inaugurates the venue,” *Times of India*, Feb. 24, 2021, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/sports/cricket/england-in-india/india-vs-england-motera-stadium-renamed-narendra-modi-stadium-as-president-ram-nath-kovind-inaugurates-the-venue/articleshow/81187445.cms>.

Swami smiled down on us. Aakash often glanced up for eye contact with the guru image as he answered in his calm and steady tone. Aakash was not only answering my questions but also doing so in a way to embody the guru's message. Like his decades' worth of interviews beforehand, our interview was enfolded within Aakash's devotional practice of pleasing and following his guru. We began by discussing how 1981 marked the beginning of a new era in BAPS.

The Press Department divided the labor of publicity between renunciant sādhus, who created the content, and male, householding devotees, who liaised with various press outlets. Male sevaks in the Press Department are especially helpful for the BAPS sādhus, whose strict observance of the Svāminārāyaṇ renunciant vows bars them from communicating with women, even via email or any electronic medium. BAPS sādhus correspond directly with male reporters and editors over phone or email. Further, all of the Indian religion beat reporters I know are men. Still, only a male sevak can speak directly with the sādhus, then walk into mixed-gender newsrooms and relay their message in person. In this embodied sense, the Press volunteers were mediators between sacred and secular discourses.

Advertisements, like Figure 3.1, were created by BAPS sādhus and submitted to the papers by the male volunteers. In 1981, Aakash worked with reporters at English- and Gujarati-language newspapers, and the *Doordarshan* (public television) News. Thinking back on his first stint of Press sevā thirty-seven years prior, Aakash remembers receiving press releases and advertisements from BAPS sādhus in the Shahibaug-neighborhood temple, driving his old scooter around Ahmedabad, and making sure to reach the various news offices before their 7:00 p.m. deadline: *Times of India*, *Gujarat Samachar*, *Sandesh*, *Gujarat Mitra*, and *Doordarshan*.

Founding the Press Department built upon BAPS' previously established publications, further connecting its internal, devotional discourse and bhakti visuality with the wider public. For example, *Svāminārāyaṇ Prakāś* began running full-page illustrated invitations for the Bicentenary Celebration in September 1980 (See Figure 3.2). The advertisements became less particular to BAPS and are more generally Svāminārāyaṇ, Gujarati, and Hindu. This September 1980 invitation, for example, introduces the purpose of BAPS' Celebration as “The Protection of Hindu Dharma” (Hindu Dharmanū Rakṣaṇ), which also became a slogan

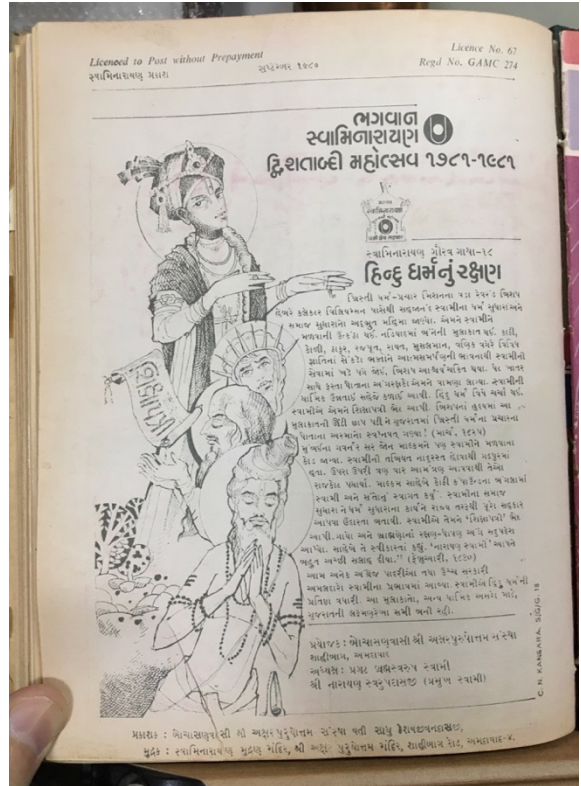


Figure 3.2: Bicentenary Celebration advertisement in *Svāminārāyaṇ Prakāś*, September 1980, back

of Hindu Nationalist politicians. The accompanying illustration positions Bhagvān Svāminārāyaṇ atop a vertical line of Hindu saints, who receive and revere his hand-written commands for devotees, the *Śikṣāpatrī*. The invitation presents Sahajānand Svāmī as a leader of Hinduism and BAPS as the modern-day stewards of his mission. In early-1981, BAPS also ran advertisements for the Celebration in the *Times of India*, like one in March that invites the general public and says, “a million devotees are expected to join.”<sup>10</sup> The announcement is unclear as to whether the “million devotees” are members of BAPS, the Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy, or Hindu Dharma in general. The work of the original Press department was to take the internal BAPS media and circulate it in public discourse.

<sup>10</sup> “Bi-centennial Fete of Swaminarayan,” *Times of India*, Mar. 5, 1981, 11.

The publishing and devotee organizing that preceded the Bicentenary Celebration scaled up BAPS' internal operations to work on a mass scale that they would maintain for decades thereafter. BAPS prepared for the 1981 festival in Ahmedabad with a five-year publication campaign, beginning in 1976, that released new texts in Gujarati and Hindi. BAPS purchased their first printing press in 1978 and installed it in the basement of their new temple in the Shahibaug-neighborhood of Ahmedabad. In early-1981, leading up to and through the Celebration, the *Satsaᅅg Patrikā* invited devotees to give sevā in particular departments, coordinated their train reservations and accommodations for staying in Ahmedabad.<sup>11</sup> Initially *ad hoc* of the festival, many sevā departments became permanent fixtures within transnational BAPS structure, including the Press and Public Relations Departments. Also, during the Celebration, Pramukh Swami initiated 200 young, male devotees as sādhus, the largest group of new satsaᅅg leaders to enter BAPS at that time. Sadhu Aksharvatsaldas (or Aksharvatsal Swami), who later became one of the lead-sādhus overseeing BAPS Publications, was among the 200 initiated in 1981. Within BAPS, the Bicentenary Celebration is remembered as “our first Mahotsav” (mass festival), a major benchmark in the community’s growth. The huge festival crowds proved that Pramukh Swami had a mass appeal and that his institution was capable of conducting mass events.

BAPS planned the Bicentenary Celebration as a venue for thousands of visitors by constructing what they called Svāminārāyaᅅ Nagar (city) on a 200-acre plot of land near Gandhi’s Ashram Road. The Celebration lasted for thirty-seven days: March 7 to April 13, 1981, and an average of 50,000 visitors attended the mass festival each day (totaling over 1.8 million), with as many as 100,000 visitors during peak events. All were greeted by an eighteen-foot statue of

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<sup>11</sup> *Satsaᅅg Patrikās* from January 12, 1981; January 19, 1981; February 2, 1981; February 9, 1981; February 16, 1981; February 23, 1981; March 2, 1981; March 9, 1981; March 16, 1981.

Svāminārāyaṇ near the sixty-foot tall entrance gate. Svāminārāyaṇ Nagar also contained a temporary temple, an amphitheater convention hall, mahāyajña (mass ritual) center, and exhibitions on Vedic culture, Bhakti poets like Meera and Narasinha Mehta, as well as Bhagvān Svāminārāyaṇ.<sup>12</sup> On such a scale, Svāminārāyaṇ Nagar was both built and advertised as a medium for the masses to encounter Pramukh Swami and Bhagvān Svāminārāyaṇ.

Aakash's 1981 Press sevā was successful in raising BAPS' public profile and replicating its devotional praise for the guru in the papers. Gujarati press coverage of BAPS' Bicentenary Celebration was overwhelmingly positive, and some writers contrasted the perceived serenity of Svāminārāyaṇ Nagar with the concurrent political unrest of 1981 Ahmedabad. "Reserve Abolition Agitation was going on in the Ahmedabad City on one side while [across the river] the Bicentenary of Bhagwan Swaminarayan was being celebrated." One Gujarati reporter was so complimentary that BAPS publications staff re-printed an English translation of his article in *Swaminarayan Bliss*.<sup>13</sup> The reporter, Ishwar Petlikar, described BAPS' festival grandly as an "Epoch-making" event and "An Unprecedented Celebration." The article says BAPS "has attracted even *the non-sectarian rational mass* by organizing special programs [emphasis added]."<sup>14</sup> In contrast to those protesting against low-caste affirmative action programs, the author portrays the crowds in Svāminārāyaṇ Nagar as peaceful, thoughtful, and organized. He suggests BAPS can bring about social transformation, making Hinduism more progressive and Gujarat more "rational." He also reproduces BAPS self-representation as the natural heirs of Svāminārāyaṇ's movement by deeming them "non-sectarian." In this way, BAPS is vaulted to the status of a pan-Hindu and modern Indian leader, and their "mass, but not gross" self-imagination was reproduced in the press.

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<sup>12</sup> Niran, "Down the Memory Lane," *Swaminarayan Bliss*, April 1981, 15—19.

<sup>13</sup> Ishwar Petlikar, "An Unprecedented Celebration," *Swaminarayan Bliss*, April 1981, 21—24.

<sup>14</sup> Ishwar Petlikar, "An Unprecedented Celebration," *Swaminarayan Bliss*, April 1981, 21.

Attracting Gujarat’s “rational mass” in 1981 follows BAPS’ engagement with the “academic and literary public outside of India” in 1978 (see Chapter 2). This time, the Press Department was able to affect such glowing press coverage back in India.

Furthermore, his appeal to massive yet rational crowds also vaulted Pramukh Swami into the sphere of other historic Hindu leaders. The same journalist wrote Pramukh Swami into a line of historic figures, saying that he furthered “the reforms carried forward by Swami Dayananda, Swami Vivekananda, and Gandhiji.”<sup>15</sup> Here, Pramukh Swami’s vision was credited with drawing historic crowds and national attention, while the Press Department’s contribution went unacknowledged. The crowds were taken as evidence of his status as a national Hindu leader, a publicly acknowledged holy man, and not the result of a diligently executed media campaign. Press coverage like this signaled an acceptance of precisely the kind of self-imaginings of BAPS as “protectors of Hindu Dharma.” The article also describes the Celebration in a secular, political valence as socially uplifting and politically progressive, all in stark contrast to the anti-low-caste protests in east Ahmedabad. Petlikar expressed his hope that BAPS would promote low-caste reservations and counter the anti-reservation riots led by Gujarati brahmins and the early formations of the BJP.<sup>16</sup> Reports like this reflected the journalist’s personal aspirations more than BAPS’ actual social work. However, later in the 1980s, BAPS later removed traditional status distinctions between low-caste and higher-born sādhus, which other Svāminārāyaṇ groups still

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<sup>15</sup> Ishwar Petlikar, “An Unprecedented Celebration,” *Swaminarayan Bliss*, April 1981, 22.

<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, BAPS framed its leadership of Hindu society in contrast to the Brahmin-led anti-reservation riots of 1981, the early stirrings of BJP and Hindu nationalist activism in western India. Later in the 1980s, BAPS would also counteract discrimination against low-caste Hindus by removing formal distinctions between Dalit renunciants and higher-born sādhus. Other Svāminārāyaṇ organizations maintain these distinction at present, and their Dalit renunciants wear white robes, instead of saffron, to mark their status. Thus, on issues of caste-based discrimination, BAPS’ self-styling as the locus of Hindu reform occasionally placed it in opposition to the BJP in the 1980s.

maintain. By impressing the journalists like Petlikar, Aakash and the other Press sevaks helped Pramukh Swami reach the status of a recognized, prominent guru in the Gujarati public.

For Akash, serving the BAPS institution is the same as serving Pramukh Swami. BAPS devotees constantly search for opportunities to please the guru. Within the sevā departments, Aakash and other sevaks feel certain that their work pleases him, as each assigned task passes down through the renunciant hierarchy. The intention to please the guru is a constitutive quality of sevā, and the departments create a direct theological connection between every individual task—parking cars, picking up trash, serving food—and the guru’s pleasure. At one point, I asked Aakash why Press sevā was important for him, and he responded the way most devotees do: “Bāpā rājī thay” (“May it please Bāpā [the guru]”). He went on, “I’ll tell you, by doing sevā, you learn so many things [...] still I am learning today.” Aakash says he has learned to work on a team and to maintain unity (samb). These lessons themselves are fitting for the guru’s wishes, as Mahant Swami regularly says that unity among devotees makes him happy. He often concludes large events by asking the audience to join hands and chant: “BAPS, ek parivār” (“one family”). Sevaks like Aakash materialize the unity and press coverage that please the guru by following instructions in their sevā departments.

For Press sevaks, their spiritual motivations and divine guru’s guidance make their work fundamentally distinct from capitalist advertising. As Aakash explained the spiritual motivation behind his sevā, he said, “Everyone is looking for peace,” and true divinity is the only source of real and lasting peace. Without a divine, brahmasvarūpa guru, like Yogiji, Pramukh Swami, and Mahant Swami, no one finds peace. Aakash says, “I can bring a person once to the satsaṅg, but he will return when he finds satisfaction, peace of mind [...] because this is not a commercial thing where if you pay five rupees you get peace. This is not tangible, but it is [an] inner feeling.” Aakash

explicitly contrasted his Press sevā from commercial publicity work, but as this chapter suggests, we can recognize that their labor is, at once, both commodified and sacralized. The Press sevaks' publicity influences the behaviors and perceptions of their audience. Their work brings new members into BAPS, which can dramatically reshape their daily lives. Temples issue non-stop requests for donations of time, labor, and money from devotees. As the adage of digital advertising goes, "If you're not paying, you're the product." The guru seeks greater numbers of devotees to change their habits, follow the BAPS way of life, and perceive him to be divine. New BAPS members are primed to see divine qualities in the guru because long before they encounter him in person, they take in thousands of the guru's mass mediations that accentuate these very qualities. Press sevaks' guru publicity helps constitutes the divine peace they perceive as their guide.

Aakash says he found peace by dedicating his life to Pramukh Swami, and in some respects, surrendering his agency to the guru's authority. The guru exercises an "expansive agency" through his institution that sevaks experience as a divine guidance.<sup>17</sup> During our conversation, I mentioned that in the 1970s, the Yogiji Maharaj announced that his rājīpo (what pleased him) was making the BAPS community grow. I asked Aakash if his Press sevā helps BAPS growth, and he nodded, "Naturally, we become the instrument to contribute to the growth of the satsaṅg." Aakash understands that publicity aids satsaṅg growth both by drawing large crowds and creating a public record of BAPS events praising Svāminārāyaṅ. Indeed, the public circulation of BAPS sacred images and spiritual discourse lays the groundwork for the widespread belief that Pramukh Swami is the spiritual successor of Bhagvān Svāminārāyaṅ. Aakash recognizes these effects, but for him, the work itself follows from his transformative experience of taking Pramukh Swami as his guru.

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<sup>17</sup> "Expansive agency" is the term Copeman and Ikegame use to describe a guru's control over and identification with their institutions: Jacob Copeman and Aya Ikegame, "The Multifarious Guru: An Introduction," in *The Guru in South Asia: New Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Jacob Copeman and Aya Ikegame (London: Routledge, 2014), 13.

By “becoming the instrument,” Aakash’s life was no longer centered on personal, worldly interests. Now he was committed to serving the BAPS community and allowing the guru’s divine force to work through him. When he devoted his entire self to serving Pramukh Swami’s mission, then he could become a better, more useful instrument and gain assurance that his life served a higher purpose.

The success of Ahmedabad’s original Press department proved that a small number of volunteers could have an outsized impact on the organization. After 1981, BAPS instituted Press Departments in all of its major Indian temples, giving the organization an impressive capacity to handle national news events with little notice. During 1981, Aakash recalls between thirty-five and forty volunteers working for the Press Department in Ahmedabad, Mumbai, and around Gujarat. By 2018, Press Departments were operating in BAPS’ temples in all major Gujarati cities: Gandhinagar, Surat, Anand, Rajkot, and Baroda, ranging in size from ten to twenty-five male sevaks apiece. Like Aakash, one or two lead-sevaks handle any day-to-day matters in their respective cities. They communicate with reporters in coordination with BAPS sādhus. The full Press Department only assembles for large occasions like mass festivals or, for example, when Pramukh Swami passed away in August 2016. His final rites demanded near-constant work of the Gujarati BAPS Press Department for a full five days. The following section turns to the unique relationship with the Gujarati press that BAPS fostered through decades of publicity work, which was on display after Pramukh Swami’s passing.

### *BAPS and the Gujarati Press*

Pramukh Swami’s final rites became a national media event that demonstrated the extent to which publicity sevā integrates BAPS within the Gujarati and Indian press. Aakash remembers those five days in August 2016 as the busiest of all his years with the BAPS Press Department. When he received the call that Pramukh Swami had passed, Aakash immediately got in his car and

drove from Ahmedabad to the village of Sarangpur, where Pramukh Swami spent his final months. Even still, Aakash says the news cameras beat him to the scene. Twenty-odd news organizations, both local and national, encamped the BAPS Sarangpur temple for the five days of Pramukh Swami’s funerary rites. More than two million people came to pay respects in that time. Fifty volunteers of the Gujarati BAPS Press Department assembled in Sarangpur and worked around the clock to handle the media personnel. At any given moment, Aakash estimates, they had between fifty-five and seventy-five reporters and camera operators to attend. Prime Minister Narendra Modi was among the VIP mourners. He gave an impassioned speech grieving the loss, weeping as he spoke, and calling Pramukh Swami his “father.” Modi’s speech happened to fall on August 15, 2016, Indian Independence Day. Under the BJP government, Pramukh Swami’s passing became a national mourning event.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi pays Tribute to HH Pramukh Swami Maharaj  
 1,024,068 views  
 LIKE DISLIKE SHARE SAVE ...  
 BAPChannel  
 Published on Aug 15, 2016  
 SUBSCRIBED 154K

In addition to the Prime Minister, some Indian press outlets gave Pramukh

*Figure 3.3: Video of the Modi speech, distributed through the YouTube BAPS Channel on August 15, 2016.*

Swami an exceptional level of coverage. Independence Day is also traditionally a national press holiday. Nevertheless, *Divya Bhaskar* ran a special edition that August 15, covering the events in Sarangpur. *Divya Bhaskar* is the Gujarati branch of *Dainik Bhaskar*, India’s largest newspaper by circulation. It made waves by breaking with tradition for its Independence Day Pramukh Swami edition. Some even compared Pramukh Swami’s 2016 media coverage to that of Gandhiji’s

assassination in 1948, according to Aakash. This was just another example of how their Press sevā helped cement Pramukh Swami’s legacy as a guru of national and historic importance.

Even amidst this national media bonanza, Aakash describes his Press sevā as responsive, passive, and never proactive. He does so with details in his stories, like the fact that the camera operators beat him to Sarangpur that day. He insists that the press has always initiated contact with BAPS, from 1981 through 2016, saying, “we have never been proactive to make the people aware about what we are doing” and “We did not make any specific attempt to give publicity, active publicity, but it was the interest or curiosity of the media and the people at large which drew them.” Aakash characterizes the role of his press Press sevā as answering existent and persistent public questions. In his view, in the presence of such a holy person as Pramukh Swami, it is natural that all people would be interested in him. Aakash’s characterization may efface certain realities of his sevā, especially in the early years when BAPS went out of its way to raise Pramukh Swami’s public profile. In recent years, though, BAPS and Pramukh Swami became household names across India, particularly after 2005, when their Akshardham temple complex opened in New Delhi. Reporters have maintained a working relationship with the Press department, “so we have very less work to do, to be very honest.” Aakash’s Press workload has indeed lightened over time.

Aakash’s insistence on the “passive publicity” of BAPS reflects another dimension of what he terms “becoming an instrument” for the brahmaswarūpa guru. Pramukh Swami is more than a holy man for Aakash; he is the authentic voice of Bhagvān Svāminārāyaṇ on Earth. When he helps a positive article into publication, he is serving God’s will. Aakash believes that God wants a properly reverent representation of Pramukh Swami for the benefit of society at large. For him, the only reason so many people attended 1981 is that Pramukh Swami is divine. Narendra Modi and two million others attended the funeral rites because they all recognize his divine right of guru-

ship. Two million mourners cannot be wrong. The size of the crowd and the historic level of publicity prove to Akash that he is serving a purpose far greater than himself, beyond any human vanity or shallow desire for fame. His only “active” decision is to devote his entire self to God and guru, and their divine inspiration handles the rest.

One of Pramukh Swami’s most famous responses to press attention came after an attack on a BAPS temple complex, what became known as the “Akshardham Response.” On September 24, 2002, after months of anti-Muslim mob violence proceeded without police or state intervention, two Muslim gunmen attacked the BAPS Akshardham temple complex in the Gujarati capital of Gandhinagar. Running through the complex, the men shot visitors and volunteers before barricading themselves on the roof of one Akshardham building. Gujarat dispatched the anti-terrorist “Black Cat” commandos, who put the complex under siege until the early morning of September 25, when they killed the two gunmen.<sup>18</sup> In total, thirty-eight people, including four BAPS sevaks and one sādhu, were killed and seventy were injured. The gunmen left a letter on the scene indicating their attack was in response to the anti-Muslim pogroms earlier that year. In the wake of the attack, Pramukh Swami limited press access and used the platform to call for peace, aiming of deterring any retaliation. He limited photographs of the bullet-ridden temple because he considered the imagery potentially inflammatory. He feared that sensationalist coverage could incite further mob violence. Pramukh Swami publicly prayed for the souls of the victims and the gunmen and called for peaceful Hindu-Muslim unity in the days afterward. His plea for peace was efficacious, and Gujarat did not experience another wave of killings following the Akshardham attack.

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<sup>18</sup> Raymond Brady Williams, “Terror Invades Paradise,” in *Williams on South Asian Religion and Immigration: Collected Works* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publications, 2004), 131—137.

Devotional and outside publications praised Pramukh Swami’s use of the media as a model for quelling communal violence in Gujarat. Devotees took the response as an enactment of God’s grace. In the following weeks, *Swaminarayan Bliss* said of his response, “such a resource of equanimity is not found in ordinary human beings, but in people who are divine.”<sup>19</sup> A 2016 *Times of India* article reflected on the impact of his reaction, saying Pramukh Swami “pieced society back together” by “challenging an attack with calm and peace.”<sup>20</sup> The article goes on to say, “Volunteers and devotees were so disciplined that they did not curse any community, no shouting or abusing to anybody.” Pramukh Swami’s behavior demonstrated a manner of conduct for devotees to mimetically follow, with equanimity even in a time of grief. The public attention also placed the guru’s example before the Gujarati public. One of the National Security Guard officers involved with the attack later said that after such a violent year, the Akshardham Response showed “that Gujarat need not burn at every spark that is ignited.”<sup>21</sup> Notably, Pramukh Swami’s reputation as a peacemaker was bolstered by his savvy, efficacious use to the press to disrupt self-perpetuating violence in Gujarat.

The Akshardham Response and Pramukh Swami’s final rites are exceptional moments when BAPS was inundated with press inquiries and forced to respond. The remainder of this section now turns to the quotidian, routinized interactions of BAPS sevaks with reporters and news editors, who describe the Press and PR Department’s work as decidedly proactive. Gujarati-language newspapers employ religion beat reporters, who write daily religious briefs on recent events from various traditions: Hindu, Muslim, Jain, and Christian. These reporters also compile

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<sup>19</sup> *Swaminarayan Bliss*, October-November 2002, 7.

<sup>20</sup> Ajay Umat, “Pramukh Swami, the Holy Man Behind Internationally Renowned ‘Akshardham Response,’” *Times of India*, Aug. 14, 2016, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Pramukh-Swami-the-holy-man-behind-internationally-renowned-case-study-Akshardham-Response/articleshow/53693091.cms>.

<sup>21</sup> Umat, “Akshardham Response,” *Times of India*, Aug. 14, 2016.

weekly newspaper inserts that typically include spiritual essays, astrological charts, horoscope readings, holiday explainers, and biographies of prominent gurus. BAPS features often in both daily and weekly sections. Ahmedabad's Gujarati newspapers print a daily religion section often titled "*Dharma-Sampradāy-Samāj*" after the self-descriptions and scales of various groups, i.e., Hindu Dharma, the Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy, and the Arya Samāj.

Both religious leaders and Gujarati press figures express a commitment to keeping religious affairs, positive and negative, in the public discourse. The Gujarati reporters and editors I met during fieldwork often criticized India's English-language newspapers as "pseudo-secular" for their inadequate staff and coverage of religious news.<sup>22</sup> The religion beat reporters are unafraid to publish exposés, often on sexual impropriety or financial embezzlement by prominent holy men, including some Svāminārāyaṇs. During and after my fieldwork, my Svāminārāyaṇ contacts, both BAPS and non-, made a habit of sharing their most recent newspaper coverage with me. Some would even send the exposé stories to deny their validity and criticize the click-bait mentality of reporters trying to advance their careers. Reporters and editors say their job is to remain objective and even-handed in their coverage of various religious groups, even those who try to curate their public image.<sup>23</sup>

Religion reporters are familiar with BAPS as an organization that is uniquely and effectively engaged in its press representation. One of Ahmedabad's religion reporters told me BAPS' work in press coverage was exceptional among all Svāminārāyaṇ and all Hindu groups in Gujarat; "Every morning they collect newspapers from more than fifty countries, and they read

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<sup>22</sup> On the wider disparities of religious representation in English- and vernacular-language Indian presses see Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics After Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>23</sup> During fieldwork, I found religion beat journalists to be academic allies in this research. These men (and all the Gujarati religion reporters I know are men) work the turf of religion and media every day. They know its issues, sensitivities, leaders, and followers.

everything” he drove the point home: “they read more than the Whitehouse.” In his decades of experience, he found that no other religious group works as much to monitor and maintain its public image. BAPS’ constant press awareness helps them prevent negative coverage from spreading and affect favorable coverage on a daily basis. The *Dainik Bhaskar* News Editor described BAPS as a collegial, professional organization, that was particularly easy to work with. BAPS always provides their own written summary of events and quality, high-resolution photographs ready for print. He also explained why BAPS appears so frequently in their religion section. His paper’s general criteria for reporting on religious events in its daily section is 500 attendees: “If 500 people attend, we print it. And BAPS always has more than 500 people.” BAPS knows the ins and outs of each newspaper’s publishing standards, which they have used to their advantage. During my 2018 fieldwork in Ahmedabad, I never came across a printed story on BAPS that was anything short of glowing.

While BAPS’ remains ever-present in print journalism, their televised representation is relatively subdued, compared with other famous gurus. In the world of Indian cable news, Hindu paṇḍits can be TV pundits, too. That is, gurus, sādhus, and other holy figures—many of whom self-identify as paṇḍits—regularly appear on cable-news programs as “talking heads,” or in the language of American cable news, “TV pundits.” In British India, the Sanskritic term paṇḍit for a wise, learned person became a dismissive English descriptor for pontificators and pseudo-authorities.<sup>24</sup> Today certain celebrity and entrepreneurial gurus, like Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and Baba

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<sup>24</sup> *Hobson-Jobson* is a British colonial dictionary of exchange-words between Indian and English languages, in both directions: British usage of words from Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, etc, as well as popular South Asian usage of English words. The entry on “Pundit” explains that “The Pundit of the Supreme Court was a Hindu Law-Officer, whose duty was to advise the English Judges when needful on questions of Hindu Law. The office became extinct on the constitution of the ‘High Court,’ superseding the Supreme Court and Sudder Court...” Henry Yule and A. C. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson: The Definitive Glossary of British India*, ed. Kate Teltscher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 430.

Ramdev, embody both senses of the term. They make regular appearances on cable news segments and run even more frequent televised advertisements for their ayurvedic health and wellness products. In 2018, watching cable news with friends in Ahmedabad helped me see the grain of salt with which some Indian Hindus simultaneously jeered and accepted these cable-news gurus. Viewers will write off these figures as salesmen in renunciant's clothes and then, on their next shopping trip, pick up their ayurvedic toothpaste, lotions, and vitamins. Their advertisements effectively promote sales, but the gurus also lose some public reverence in the process. BAPS bookstores also sell similar ayurvedic health products, but they are not advertised on television. The BAPS preference for print media keeps them above the fray of everyday political debates and consumer-driven advertising.

BAPS spokesmen, like one UK-born sādhu named Brahmvihari Swami, give infrequent televised interviews and do not participate in debates of the daily news. When they do appear on TV, the spokesmen promote upcoming major BAPS events and new temple announcements. BAPS' TV media strategy is more focused on promoting the institution of BAPS instead of any particular sādhu. Still, in contemporary Gujarat, Brahmvihari Swami is an especially popular speaker from BAPS. He also garners the title of paṇḍit, in the sense of a religious scholar. For example, in February 2019, Gujarat University announced they would bestow seven honorary doctorates to prominent Gujarati religious figures, including Brahmvihari Swami. This announcement's headline and photographs in *NavGujarat Samay* foreground the honor given to BAPS and Brahmvihari (pictured on the left of Figure 3.4). This paper, *NavGujarat Samay* could have focused on any of the other six recipients receiving the same doctorate, but the article singled out Brahmvihari. In 2018, Gujarati newspaper readers and journalists often suggested to me that *NavGujarat Samay*—one of the top three dailies in the Ahmedabad market—gives the most

favorable coverage to BAPS because their news editor is BAPS member. Regardless, this article reflects the general modus operandi of BAPS to have its spokesmen revered and publicized as paṇḍits without falling to the level of TV pundits.

Like their colleagues in newspapers, TV journalists and editors in Ahmedabad say that no other Svāminārāyaṇ or Hindu group makes such systematic and consistent efforts as BAPS to work with the press. I witnessed an example of this effort when I toured the Ahmedabad offices of Gujarati *Doordarshan* TV. A BAPS Press volunteer and a *Doordarshan* worker, who was also a BAPS devotee, gave me a tour around the *Doordarshan* offices and campus. As we walked through studios and newsrooms, they both emphasized that BAPS *never* pays for television coverage. However, channels will often run stories live coverage of BAPS events, because the Ahmedabad market is interested in Svāminārāyaṇ and BAPS news. “Our intention is very clear,” the BAPS sevak repeated to me: “We are only here to maintain good relations.” When I spoke with the *Doordarshan* News editor that day, I got a sense of how their good relationship came to be.

When the BAPS sevak and I first entered the *Doordarshan* News Editor’s office, he was in a meeting with two of his reporters, and his secretary asked us to wait outside a few minutes. After a moment, I thought the BAPS sevak seemed antsy. He kept asking the secretary if we could meet for *just* five minutes, “Tell him *I’m* here” he said coaxingly, persistently, and he repeated his name for her to pass along. She did not. Finally, after several attempts at persuading the secretary, the



Figure 3.4: Announcement in NavGuajrat Samay newspaper (February 2019) saying “BAPS sādhu Brahmvihārīdāsji” (top-left) among seven paṇḍits receive honorary doctorates from Gujarat University.

BAPS sevak opened the editor's door and appealed directly for a five-minute conversation with a foreign student interested in Indian journalism. The editor acquiesced, invited us in, and his reporters accommodated as I inserted a five-minute interview into the middle of their meeting.

More than a little uncomfortable with our intrusion, I began by asking the News Editor how long he has known the BAPS sevak. Wryly he answered, "Since the day I came here [to the Gujarati News office], these people have been approaching me [...] They are very prompt." I quickly noticed the photo of Mahant Swami taped to the wall in a corner of his office, and I asked if he was a BAPS devotee. He said no, but he received the photo when this BAPS Press sevak took him for "darśan of Mahant Swami." The sevak happily noted Mahant Swami's was the only guru photo in the office and that the editor had not visited any other gurus in Ahmedabad. This was an important point for a devotee: this photograph was an official BAPS portrait and a sacred image meant to be venerated with daily ārtī and darśan. However, the editor replied in a less than reverent tone: "I haven't gone because no one else has taken the extra steps he has taken." No other Hindu group is quite so intentional and consistent in fostering relationships with Gujarati news organizations. In this way, BAPS Press sevaks are known in Gujarati journalism as the epitome of media-conscious religious advocates. Whether they call it "passive publicity" or simply "maintaining good relations," the BAPS Press volunteers have fostered a uniquely close relationship with each and every media outlet in Ahmedabad and around Gujarat. After five minutes had passed, the BAPS sevak promptly announced we should respect the editor's time, and we stepped out of his office.

Journalists and Editors may tease the BAPS volunteers for their uncommon persistence, but they also seem genuinely appreciative of BAPS' level of professionalism. During a long conversation with the News Editor of Ahmedabad's most popular newspaper, I described the

contemporary American politics of Hindu representation in broad strokes, including that some academics feel pressured by BAPS to censor unflattering information. The editor was baffled as he was incredulous; he said, “in 25 years of journalism, I have never seen that. So it is very hard to believe, I’m telling you, very frankly.” As he explained, these BAPS people are just too “nice.” The editor, a self-described atheist, was skeptical that BAPS had a reputation as anti-intellectual and prone to censorship.<sup>25</sup> He responded, “honestly, I have never experienced any arm-twisting” from BAPS, though he has received threats from other religious groups, both Hindu and Muslim. He described his BAPS contacts as “professional,” “respectful,” and “persistent.” For example, the editor mentioned that in early-2018, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his family visited BAPS’ Akshardham temple complex in Gandhinagar, Gujarat. His paper printed BAPS photos of the Trudeau visit. Due to security concerns, the press was not permitted entry, but BAPS photo sevaks “always take very nice, professional pictures.” He chose to print one photograph of Trudeau’s son in Indian garb performing a pūjā (worship) ritual. “He was a cute kid, it was very nice to have that nice photo in the paper.” He respects BAPS’ quality of media work, which makes his job easier. Beyond this newspaper, the Gujarati press and BAPS generally enjoy working together without any undue controversy or friction.

What of critical journalism? I asked, surely some stories are less “nice”? As it happened, the day we spoke, his paper printed the story of a (non-BAPS) Svāminārāyaṇ sādhu who absconded from his temple and eloped with a female devotee. The editor responded, “I print this [smacks the paper] and this can be more defamatory than any [academic] article. Why? My circulation in

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<sup>25</sup> See for example, Edward Simpson, “Is Anthropology Legal? Earthquake, Blitzkrieg, and Ethical Futures,” *Focaal—Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* 74, no. 1 (2016): 113—128; Edward Simpson, *The Political Biography of an Earthquake: Aftermath and Amnesia in Gujarat, India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); also a problematic, if representative, perspective in Martha Nussbaum, *The Clash Within: Democracy, Religious Violence, and India’s Future* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

Ahmedabad is close to 350,000 copies. So in Ahmedabad alone I reach, every day, 1,000,000 people.” He compared his circulation to my potential academic readership: “This is more defamatory than any book you can write.” I agreed and asked, what if some Svāminārāyaṇs complain about this story? The editor answered bluntly, “We will not care.” And he went on to explain his “not my job” attitude toward maintaining any particular religious group’s pious, pure reputation. On the overall Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy, he said, “We have written about their homosexuality, pedophilia, this thing [today’s article], all these things, and nobody has called us... So it is very hard, sorry, but it is very hard to believe that any BAPS guy would...” pressure academic censorship. The *real* problem, the editor unfortunately continued, is Muslims. He felt threatened by “violent Muslim” activists who give him angry, threatening phone calls for every negative story he prints. Stereotypes of “violent Muslims” continue to permeate public discourse in Ahmedabad, obscuring the ongoing history of their second-class citizenship in Gujarat. Within the religious politics of contemporary Gujarat, a dominant Hindu community like the Svāminārāyaṇs can absorb a certain amount of critical coverage while maintaining their social standing.

BAPS’ long-term strategy to cultivate positive, working relationships with the press has solidified its reputation as a respectable religious organization in Gujarat. Certain historic events, like the 2002 Akshardham attack and his 2016 funeral, shaped Pramukh Swami’s legacy in the press. But perhaps more importantly, Press sevaks’ regular, collegial contact keeps religion beat reporters aware of BAPS and produces a constant trickle of positive coverage. Focusing on their interactions with press figures casts light on the interpersonal dynamics that ultimately shape BAPS’ public image. Aakash, for example, upholds BAPS’ respectability through his deferential, cordial manner of working with press figures. During our interview, Aakash kept a calm repose,

broken only briefly during a few emotional moments to express his loving devotion for Pramukh Swami Maharaj. Aakash inculcated this demeanor over his decades of work within BAPS' sevak departments by watching his guru and mimetically following his manner of speech, especially his equanimity. He learned to embody the guru's message, not just to communicate it. Reporters in Ahmedabad now expect such "nice" BAPS Press sevaks and their prompt, regular visits in the newsroom. Now, in the final section, I turn to the related but distinct work of the Public Relations Department, which invites VIPs to connect and collaborate with BAPS. Their work gives BAPS a role in Indian diplomatic relations and international philanthropy.

*PR Sevā: Becoming Hindu Ambassadors*

BAPS' Public Relations Department was also founded in Ahmedabad for the 1981 Bicentenary Celebration, and it has remained an institutional fixture in the decades since. The PR Department is tasked with attracting VIPs—politicians, philanthropists, religious leaders, celebrities, academics—either to meet the BAPS guru or attend a BAPS event. PR sevaks ensure the VIP's experience is as seamless and pleasurable as possible: they arrange and pay for transportation, accommodations, private tours, and personal translators. Before the VIP departs, the PR sevak's final task is to solicit and document a positive quote about their impression of BAPS, which will then circulate through BAPS publications and spiritual discourses. For example, the "What People Say" section of the BAPS website includes quotes from Prince Charles, Princess Diana, the Dalai Lama, Jesse Jackson, Bill Clinton, Jimmy Carter, and Richard Branson, just to name a few.<sup>26</sup>

PR and Press Departments work closely together because every celebrity visit is also an occasion for good press, like the Trudeau family visit mentioned above. The two departments are

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<sup>26</sup> "Opinions," BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, Swaminarayan Aksharpith, accessed February 17, 2021, <https://www.baps.org/About-BAPS/WhatPeopleSay/Opinions.aspx>.

both under the supervision of Ishwarcharan Swami within Swaminarayan Aksharpith at the Shahibaug temple in Ahmedabad. Like many sevā departments in BAPS, the PR Department is overseen by male sādhus and operated by the part-time labor of householding sevaks, both male and female.<sup>27</sup> In recent years, the PR Department has trained a growing core of PR sevaks, who are remarkably talented at staying on script. In the 1980s, Pramukh Swami positioned himself as *the* ambassador of Hinduism, and took care of most VIP tete-a-tetes himself. Later, as Pramukh Swami aged and the PR Department grew, the Hindu ambassador role transferred to Ishwarcharan Swami, his protégé Brahmvihari Swami, and eventually the Department sevaks.

This section reviews Pramukh Swami's formative role in creating a BAPS PR strategy before turning to more recent PR work by Brahmvihari Swami and the experience of one PR sevak. Much like the Press Department succeeded in transferring BAPS' internal devotional language into Gujarat's public, journalistic discourse, the PR Department has also succeeded in convincing international political and business leaders of BAPS' status as preeminent, global representatives of Hinduism. The PR Department has routinized the success of Pramukh Swami's 1970s and '80s world tours, such that hundreds of sevaks now play the same role. Pramukh Swami's international status as a Hindu ambassador eventually transferred to the Department as a whole. In this way, the institution of BAPS, more than any individual, charismatic speaker, has claimed its place in the world of international philanthropy and become an important player in Indian foreign relations. Especially under the Modi government, BAPS has emerged as an informal arm of Indian diplomacy, building international temples as unofficial Indian embassies.

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<sup>27</sup> To my knowledge, all PR and Press sevak labor is offered freely, and no sevak receives direct monetary compensation for their work. Still, the contact with media personalities and VIPs bring certain benefits and make these two departments among the most sought-after sevā assignments within BAPS, compared with the Kitchen and Parking Departments, for example. Other departments within Publications are also led by male sādhus, but employ a full-time, salaried staff of mostly male devotees (see Chapter 5).

During his world tours in the 1980s, Pramukh Swami fashioned himself as an ambassador of Hinduism through meetings with global political and religious leaders. For example, during his 1980 world tour to promote the 1981 Bicentenary Celebration, the guru met with political leaders from every country on his path: Kenya, the UK, the US, and Canada. He met political leaders in Kenya, including President Daniel arap Moi and the Nairobi City Council.<sup>28</sup> Along his tour of the UK, Pramukh Swami met with Members of Parliament and Mayors,<sup>29</sup> and received more media attention in the *Evening News*, *Evening Standard*, *Daily Express* newspapers and on BBC television.<sup>30</sup> Pramukh Swami also engaged in interfaith work: attending the 1980 Conference of World Religions and an Interfaith Committee and meeting with the Chief Imam of the London Mosque and the Archbishop of Canterbury.<sup>31</sup> Across the pond, the guru met with the Canadian Solicitor General, Canada’s Indian Consul General,<sup>32</sup> and local politicians in Toronto.<sup>33</sup> In the US, he met with politicians from Texas and Southern California and spoke at both BAPS and non-BAPS temples, like the Hare Krishna (ISKCON) temple in Los Angeles.<sup>34</sup> He also received a letter from US President Ronald Reagan’s desk. In the following years, Pramukh Swami would address the UK Parliament and the UN General Assembly. As *Swaminarayan Bliss* put it “Pramukh Swami Maharaj is on a globe-trotting tour — the acting courier of Lord Swaminarayan — conveying the heavenly message of the scriptures”; he and BAPS were able to form and perform Hindu ambassadorship through his tours abroad.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Pramukh Swami is photographed with the President of Kenya, Daniel arap Moi: *Svāminārāyaṇ Prakāś*, June 1980, inside front cover. Pramukh Swami photographed with the Nairobi City Council: *Svāminārāyaṇ Prakāś*, June 1980, 18.

<sup>29</sup> *Satsaṅg Patrikā*, August 4, 1980, 1—4.

<sup>30</sup> *Satsaṅg Patrikā*, August 18, 1980, 3.

<sup>31</sup> *Swaminarayan Bliss*, October 1980, 1.

<sup>32</sup> *Satsaṅg Patrikā*, September 15, 1980, 2.

<sup>33</sup> *Svāminārāyaṇ Prakāś*, October 1980, 21.

<sup>34</sup> *Satsaṅg Patrikā*, September 29, 1980, 1—3.

<sup>35</sup> *Swaminarayan Bliss*, October 1980, 1.

Pramukh Swami’s high-level meetings also elevated his status in the Indian press. For example, the *Times of India* described Pramukh Swami’s role in a 1984 trip to Rome as the “spiritual leader” and “spokesman for the Swaminarayans.”<sup>36</sup> His meeting with Pope John Paul II was heralded as “the first meeting ever with the head of a Hindu spiritual movement.”<sup>37</sup> Just as American and British newspapers had claimed before, the *Times of India* described “the Swaminarayans [as] a worldwide movement that boasts the largest following of Hindus outside India,” without citing specific numbers. BAPS’ internal publications also took the papal meeting as a sign of Pramukh Swami’s new international status. The cover of the May

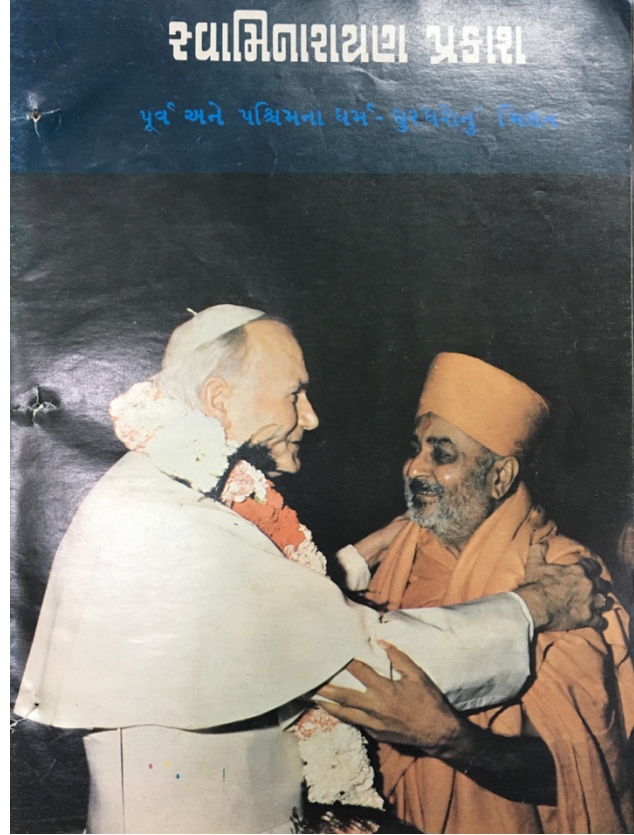


Figure 3.5: cover of Svāminārāyaṇ Prakāś (May 1984)  
Pope John Paul II embracing Pramukh Swami Maharaj.

1984 issue of *Svāminārāyaṇ Prakāś* features a photograph of Pramukh Swami and the Pope embracing (see Figure 3.5), and the header reads “Meeting of Religions East and West” (pūrva ane paścimnā dharmadurdhasēnū milan). In this way, from 1980 onward, Pramukh Swami positioned himself as an ambassador of Hindus, and the East, to the rest of the world.

Other transnational gurus likewise sought international acclaim in the 1970s and ‘80s but often courted controversy, such as ISKCON’s A.C Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada, Osho or Bhagwan

<sup>36</sup> Associated Press, “Pope meets monks of Swaminarayan,” *Times of India*, Apr. 8, 1984, 9.

<sup>37</sup> Associated Press, “Pope meets monks of Swaminarayan,” *Times of India*, Apr. 8, 1984, 9.

Rajneesh, and others. Their strategy differed from BAPS' in some fundamental ways, chiefly that Pramukh Swami seldom accepted any white, Western converts. The counterculture movement of the 1960s and '70s provided transnational Hindu organizations with an influx of new members, but their institutional affiliations were relatively short-lived. White Hindu converts proved less committed to a Hindu way of life once their guru passed away or fell victim to scandalous press coverage. The recruitment practices of organizations like ISKCON also attracted lawsuits from conservative Christian, "anti-cult" associations, such as the American Family Foundation and Love Our Children.<sup>38</sup> One especially publicized court case in 1977 involving a fourteen-year-old girl, Robin George, accused ISKCON of "brainwashing." George's case and ignited a national debate, drawing condemnation of their recruitment tactics as manipulation and kidnapping.<sup>39</sup>

In contrast, BAPS largely avoided the "cult" label and public scandals over the same period. The long-term success of Pramukh Swami's strategy was built on a base of émigré Hindus who supported their temples and their guru with a life-long, even multi-generational, commitment to BAPS. Pramukh Swami also foreplanned BAPS to continue operating after his death and transferred most of his responsibilities well in advance, including the publicity work over to his senior sādhus and sevaks in the Press and PR Departments. Beyond achieving the status as a celebrity guru, Pramukh Swami harnessed the power of PR for the benefit of BAPS as an institution. He the garnered public support of local politicians, won approval for new temple construction, and convinced potential new members that his organization taught a respectable, traditional form of Hinduism.

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<sup>38</sup> David G. Bromley, "Hare Krishna and the Anti-Cult Movement," in *Krishna Consciousness in the West*, ed. David G. Bromley and Larry D. Shinn (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1989), 255—292.

<sup>39</sup> Hugh Urban, "ISKCON (Hare Krishna): Eastern Religions in American and the "Brainwashing" Debate," in *New Age, Neopagan, and New Religious Movements: Alternative Spirituality in Contemporary America* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 201—219.

The PR Department institutionalized Pramukh Swami's approach to VIP meetings and public endorsements. Their work continues today under the leadership of Brahmvihari Swami, perhaps the best-known BAPS PR representative at present. Born and raised in the UK, he is an elegant bilingual speaker in both English and Gujarati. Brahmvihari Swami is the first point of contact for most heads of state, actors, and celebrities who interact with BAPS. He also gives TV interviews discussing new BAPS projects, publishes regular newspaper columns, and addresses leadership conferences and peace summits. The rest of this section will focus on Brahmvihari's recent publicity and political work. However, it is important to note beforehand that he is but one sādhu within a vast renunciant hierarchy. He is not so charismatic as to be irreplaceable. Hypothetically, if he was seen to use the PR platform for his own benefit, instead of BAPS', he could be replaced instantly. This is to say that charisma is but one virtue of successful PR, and BAPS is chiefly interested in unifying and advancing their transnational temple network.

One of Brahmvihari's early PR coups came in April 2001, as Gujarat and Kutch were still reeling from a devastating earthquake on January 26, 2001. At the time, the non-profit organization called "BAPS Care International" (now "BAPS Charities") offered extensive relief services to earthquake victims.<sup>40</sup> 12,300 lives were lost during the earthquake, and much of Bhuj, the region's largest city, was reduced to rubble. Millions of dollars in humanitarian aid began flowing into Kutch from governmental and private sources, both domestic and foreign. The BAPS relief work was part of this response. BAPS sent 180 sādhus and 4,500 devotees to work in Kutch. Within days of the quake, BAPS work was well underway, serving hot daily meals to tens of thousands, offering free medical aid, and constructing temporary (and later, permanent) housing with tents

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<sup>40</sup> For a critical account of BAPS' expansion into Kutch under the auspices of relief work, see Edward Simpson, *The Political Biography of an Earthquake: Aftermath and Amnesia in Gujarat, India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

and tin houses. According to the February 2001 issue of *Swaminarayan Bliss*, the Kutch earthquake relief may be the single largest BAPS charity operation to date.

At the same time, former US President Bill Clinton was touring the region with the American India Foundation, a non-profit he co-founded as part of the Kutch relief. Brahmvihari Swami reached out to request that Clinton visit the BAPS temple in Gandhinagar during his tour. Before the two shared a phone call, the President's staff informed Brahmvihari he would have sixty seconds for a conversation with Clinton. Brahmvihari also convinced Clinton's staff that the female staffer, who would listen-in on the call, should not speak during their conversation. Brahmvihari explained that his renunciant vow of celibacy (*niṣkāṁ*) forbid him speaking or listening to women on the phone. With these conditions settled beforehand, Brahmvihari prepared for his one-minute conversation with Clinton. During the call, Brahmvihari introduced the President to BAPS's relief work and convinced him to meet Pramukh Swami at their Gandhinagar Akshardham temple complex. Pramukh Swami was famously pleased by President Clinton's visit, so Brahmvihari's PR *sevā* achieved the devotional goal of pleasing his guru. The meeting would also prove consequential for BAPS' later representation of its charity work.

Before the Clinton meeting, BAPS publications discussed their earthquake relief effort as the guru's expression of love for the people of Kutch. At every point, the guru's involvement in this work is portrayed as both intimate and commanding. For example, early on, "[Pramukh Swami] instructed that hot food be served to make people feel that they are cared for. When somebody suggested that it would be difficult to provide hot food, [Pramukh Swami] asked, "How would you feel if your mother serves you a cold lunch?" The objection was overruled."<sup>41</sup> Maternal in his love for the people of Kutch, Pramukh Swami is shown to be deeply concerned with even

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<sup>41</sup> *Swaminarayan Bliss*, February 2001, 4.

the minor details of the work, personally checking that all relief packages included cooking oil and toothpaste. He was also adamant “that the aid should not be considered as charity by the recipients.”<sup>42</sup> Instead, the efforts should be seen as a devotional practice and a physical expression of the guru’s motto: “In the joy of others lies our own.” The magazine is shot through with praise of Pramukh Swami’s “guidance and inspiration”<sup>43</sup> and an emphasis on the BAPS temple as “the hub of BAPS relief operations.”<sup>44</sup> This is top-down rhetoric of divine inspiration, which foregrounds the guru’s vision and orchestration for this outpouring of religious care.

Pramukh Swami’s meeting with President Clinton gave BAPS another vocabulary to represent its relief efforts. The *Swaminarayan Bliss* from April 2001 gave updates on relief work for the earthquake victims and publicized the encounter between Pramukh Swami and Bill Clinton. When they met on

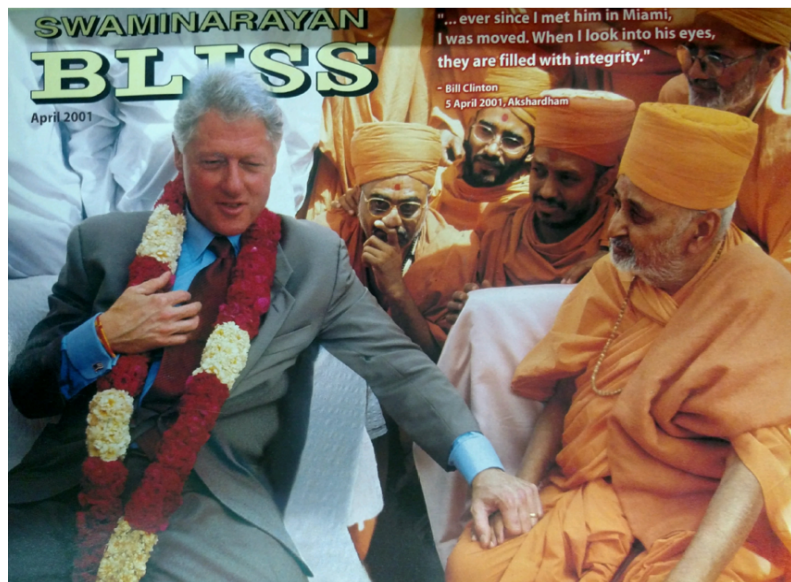


Figure 3.6: Cover of *Swaminarayan Bliss*, April 2001. The quote from President Clinton reads: “...ever since I met him in Miami, I was moved. When I look into his eyes, they are filled with integrity.”

April 5, Clinton complimented and thanked Pramukh Swami for his leadership, saying, “When I look into his eyes, they are filled with integrity” (see Figure 3.6). Clinton toured the BAPS Akshardham temple complex in Gandhinagar, Gujarat, and expressed appreciation for its beauty and spirituality, as the magazine explains. Clinton praised the humanitarian nature of BAPS’

<sup>42</sup> *Swaminarayan Bliss*, February 2001, 4.

<sup>43</sup> *Swaminarayan Bliss*, February 2001, 14.

<sup>44</sup> *Swaminarayan Bliss*, February 2001, 2.

efforts in Kutch, saying, “The reason why your organization is at the top is because you are lifting the smallest segment of society.”<sup>45</sup> Upon meeting some care-providing BAPS sevaks, he emphasized to role of volunteers, saying, “These are the real heroes.”<sup>46</sup>

After Clinton’s visit in 2001, BAPS nimbly adjusted its rhetoric surrounding the charities. What was formerly introduced as “not charity” but an expression of guru-devotion, soon became “grassroots volunteerism.” BAPS Care International was renamed “BAPS Charities” in 2007, and its new self-representation pivoted entirely away from that of a loving guru, feeding his children with a warm touch. The charity’s current “About Us” webpage explains, “Our History... began with grassroots volunteerism in South Asia grounded in the spirit of service. As those young volunteers began to spread across the world, BAPS Charities took shape as a medium to continue and share this spirit with new and diverse communities.”<sup>47</sup> The guru is erased from this BAPS Charities history and replaced with a bottom-up inspiration of idealistic youth. The charity’s rhetoric is crafted for an international audience. Importantly, BAPS Charities is a registered charity in the US, UK, Canada, South Africa, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, New Zealand, but not in India. Its universalist language of “service” and “volunteerism” may serve the diasporic institution in its variable socio-political contexts. The self-representation is stripped of any distinctive Hindu-ness and assimilates to the generic rhetoric of international non-profits.

Nevertheless, a gap remains between the published rhetoric of “volunteering” and the rank-and-file devotee’s discussion of sevā given for love of the guru. Since 2001, their publications in both English and Gujarati articulate the charity ethic as bottom-up, humanitarian altruism, and theology is often rendered invisible in these mass mediations. Devotees still articulate their

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<sup>45</sup> *Swaminarayan Bliss*, April 2001, 7.

<sup>46</sup> *Swaminarayan Bliss*, April 2001, 7.

<sup>47</sup> “About Us,” BAPS Charities, accessed September 27, 2020, <https://www.bapscharities.org/about-us/>.

personal experiences of sevā and with BAPS Charities as a guru-centric spiritual endeavor, like “becoming an instrument” of his will. The devotees’ guru-centric spiritual motivations have been well translated by Brahmvihari Swami and others to meld with the language of international philanthropic entities, like the American India Foundation. Interestingly, even this work of translating BAPS sevā into “volunteering” is undertaken as a guru-centric practice of devotion.

During my 2018 fieldwork, one particular family of devotees in Ahmedabad exemplified the work of PR sevā and the mentality of sevaks across BAPS. I first met Rohan Desai and the Desai family for an evening meal at their home in the upper-middle-class “Satellite” neighborhood. Like most BAPS PR sevaks, they all speak fluent English. Our conversation switched between English and Gujarati over our several hours together. The family considers positive media coverage as proof for the divinity of the BAPS gurus, and they believe both Pramukh Swami and Mahant Swami possess the same, authentic divinity. The whole Desai family—father, mother, and daughter—have been BAPS devotees for around 20 years, and all three give different forms of sevā. Rohan gives sevā in the PR Department under Brahmvihari Swami. He also helps with administrative work in Brahmvihari’s office whenever he has free time. He handles VIP guests and reporters as a BAPS spokesman. His wife works full-time as the principal of a prestigious BAPS boys’ school in nearby Gandhinagar, in addition to occasional PR sevā, and their daughter gives sevā through the young women’s group at the BAPS Satellite temple.

Brahmvihari Swami trained Rohan as a PR sevak and gave him new skills that exemplify how becoming a BAPS devotee changed his life. During our conversation, Rohan described his PR training in 2012, when the Ahmedabad PR Department had grown to around 120—130 male sevaks. Brahmvihari called them together for a PR Department meeting, and roughly 80 male sevaks attended an afternoon-long training session. Rohan enjoyed the session: “The best part of

it: [Brahmvihari] is training us to talk about anything”; how to prepare for a 3-minute speech or 5-minute speech. Brahmvihari Swami taught from his personal experience, and Rohan was enthralled with the story of his 2001 phone call with Clinton. Through the PR training session, Brahmvihari helped Rohan and the other sevaks feel more confident speaking with VIPs. He gave them plenty of tips: to keep calm, to hold an upright posture, to stay on topic, to speak clearly, and stick to their talking points. “He taught us how to talk to a dignitary, how to talk to a minister,” even “the president,” said Rohan. These new speaking skills raised his confidence and helped him overcome a mild stutter. The sevak training became a focal point in Rohan’s personal story of being transformed by his time in BAPS and the PR sevā became his means of inculcating the qualities he admires in Brahmvihari.

PR sevā brings a new sense of hopefulness to Rohan’s life and helping VIPs experience the guru’s divinity gives him a sense of purpose. He feels “positive vibrations” inside BAPS, which help him overcome his struggles with depression. Rohan’s engineering job often makes him work overnight shifts, and he finds the long, dark hours alone weigh on his mental health. His experience with PR sevā could not be more different. Rohan is thrilled by his VIP meetings and rattles off a number of prominent Indian businessmen he had occasion to meet. Indeed, of all the sevā departments, PR seems to be a particularly cushy assignment, accompanying the rich and famous. This sevā has brought Rohan spiritual satisfaction and a rosier worldview. The political arguments on cable TV and news of environmental disasters, for example, are a constant source of “negative vibrations” that contribute to depression, for Rohan and society in general. BAPS, by contrast, uses publicity to uplift the masses and spread positivity.

Rohan believes the PR work is important for conveying BAPS’ message to VIPs who expect special treatment. “They are used to those pretenses,” he says, and without the personal

invitations, special accommodations, and access, VIPs would not be able to recognize the guru's divinity. Part of his newfound optimism comes from the continued growth of BAPS, even after Pramukh Swami's passing. The BAPS guru and his sādhus regularly foretell a bright future for the organization—more devotees, more temples, more prestige—and over the past few decades, these predictions have almost always been correct. Faith in the guru's foresight gives Rohan something to feel hopeful about, and the PR sevā prompts him to share his optimism with others.

In recent years, the many powerful connections of BAPS' PR have pushed the organization to the forefront of new opportunities, including massive temple-construction contracts. Under the Modi government, BAPS and its international temple projects have also become an extension of Indian foreign policy. For example, as India attempts to normalize foreign relations with the Gulf States, the



*Figure 3.7: Political cartoon of PM Modi and a UAE Prince holding the proposed BAPS temple. The crowd says, "Thank you Modi ji" and "The cornerstone of Abu Dhabi's first Hindu temple is in PM Modi's hands." Received in February 2018 from a BJP WhatsApp group. The cartoon was created before the seven-spired design was publicly announced, and the illustrator has used an image of BAPS' New Delhi Akshardham temple instead.*

construction of state-sanctioned Hindu temples is a boon for South Asian migrant laborers and business-class investors in the Muslim-majority countries. During India's negotiations with the United Arab Emirates, the government dedicated a plot of open land half-way between Abu Dhabi

and Dubai to construct one temple for all Hindus in the country.<sup>48</sup> Prime Minister Modi awarded the temple contract to BAPS, who designed a pan-Hindu temple like none other in their transnational network (see Figure 3.7). The seven-spired temple will include sacred images of all major Hindu deities and serve as *the* center of Hindu life in the UAE. BAPS' international prestige now enables the sect to sacralize sacred images of all Hindu deities and function as spiritual leaders for Hinduism as a whole.

Furthermore, in the wake of its UAE temple win, BAPS has also begun the groundwork for constructing similar Hindu temples in Russia and other Gulf states like Bahrain and Qatar. Groups of sādhus have toured these countries, meeting with political and religious leaders to establish their bona fides.<sup>49</sup> The North American wing is constructing another massive Akshardham temple complex in New Jersey that will function as a Hindu embassy to the United States. In this way, the constant stream of diplomats and politicians visiting BAPS temples does not merely improve their public image. It also puts the institution in a perfect position to act as brokers for expanding Hindu temples abroad. BAPS' ability to speak in both the languages of Hindu guru-devotion and the international non-profit jargon brings it unique opportunities to act as Indian and Hindu ambassadors to the world.

Brahmvihari Swami's publicity around the fundraising and construction of the UAE temple reflects his ability to spiritualize foreign diplomacy and respond to its critiques. With a flair for the grandiose, Brahmvihari heralded the UAE temple announcement as a world-historical event,

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<sup>48</sup> The temple construction was national news in both the United Arab Emirates and India. For example, see Anjana Sankar and Ashwani Kumar, "First Hindu temple in Abu Dhabi to be completed by 2020," *Khaleej Times*, Feb. 18, 2018, <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/uae-india-ties/First-Abu-Dhabi-Hindu-temple-to-come-up-on-55,000-square-metres-of-land->. And in India, "Indians rejoice as foundation stone laid for first Hindu temple in Abu Dhabi," *Times of India*, Apr. 20, 2019, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/indians-rejoice-as-foundation-stone-laid-for-first-hindu-temple-in-abu-dhabi/articleshow/68966982.cms>.

<sup>49</sup> On BAPS's first visit to Russia in 2019, see Raymond Brady Williams and Tushar Shah, "Swaminarayan Hinduism in Europe," in *Handbook of Hinduism in Europe (vol. 1)*, ed. Knut A. Jacobsen and Ferdinando Sardella (Boston: Brill, 2020), 393—421.

under the banner of the famous Sanskrit verse, *vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam* (the whole world is one family). In 2018, he presented this message to the Shahibaug temple’s weekly devotional assembly and was met with thunderous applause. However, this very verse has also been invoked in previous critiques around BAPS members as harboring Hindu nationalist islamophobia. A 2007 Al Jazeera English series, called “God’s Business,” criticized BAPS along these lines, with one activist saying of the Svāminārāyaṇs, “the basic tenant of Hinduism is *vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam*... that’s the furthest we are from, and what is considered “my people” is shrinking.”<sup>50</sup> Brahmvihari Swami has reappropriated the phrase to suggest the UAE temple contract portends a new age of peace and global Hindu-Muslim unity. Notably the site of this unity will be outside of the BJP’s India and within Muslim territory. The constant expansion of BAPS gives its spokesmen ample opportunities and increasingly prominent platforms to reframe public discussions of their work.

Devotees attributed the UAE temple’s success to Pramukh Swami’s vision, and in 2018, the Gujarati press coverage was almost entirely in sync with BAPS’ internal discourse. BAPS began circulating decades-old film and photographs of Pramukh Swami traveling around the Gulf states in the 1980s in the hopes of one day building a temple there. This new legacy of Pramukh Swami was discussed in every temple’s weekly assembly, in BAPS magazines, and on their website. Devotees were encouraged to memorize these stories of the guru in the Gulf States. An essay question in 2018’s Satsang Exam (see Chapter 4) asked test-takers to explain Pramukh Swami’s spiritual work in the Arab Gulf. Likewise, religion beat reporters credited Pramukh Swami with the temple and foreign policy success. The *NavGujarat Samay* article in Figure 3.8, announces that “Pramukh Swami’s vision has come to fruition” with a groundbreaking ceremony

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<sup>50</sup> “God’s Business – Hinduism Goes Global,” *Al Jazeera English*, Sep. 24, 2007, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tXFDLQ6M\\_Dg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tXFDLQ6M_Dg). The relevant quote comes at 8:14.

for “the very first Hindu temple in the UAE.” This is not entirely accurate; there have been small Hindu temples in Dubai for years, and migrant Indian laborers have carried sacred images for home temples in the UAE for generations. Nevertheless, two years after his passing, Pramukh Swami’s reputation as a Hindu ambassador was still ascendant. The BAPS Press and PR Departments worked in sync to cement the guru’s new legacy.

BAPS Public Relations sevā enhances the guru’s spiritual power to affect world-historic events and his status to represent Hinduism as a whole. Pramukh Swami’s personal meetings with world religious and political leaders in the 1980s placed him in the aspirational role of an ambassador for Hinduism. Eventually, their connections in international philanthropy helped BAPS translate its guru-devoted sevā into humanitarian volunteerism. As the PR responsibilities shifted down to sādhus like Brahmvihari Swami and his department of sevaks, BAPS systematized his exceedingly hospitable treatment of VIPs. Their decades of networking have brought the institution increasingly prominent construction opportunities, all of which are ultimately attributed back to the guru. The PR sādhus and sevaks embody the guru’s message before the rich and powerful and expand his global influence through their connections. As the Modi government reimagines India as a Hindutva state, BAPS’ international temples become its Hindu embassies.



Figure 3.8: Article in NavGujarat Samay, Feb. 10, 2018 on the BAPS temple in the UAE, showing Brahmvihari Swami with a UAE Prince, reviewing plans for the temple. The headline reads “The very first UAE Hindu temple, constructed by BAPS, has its groundbreaking ceremony tomorrow.”

*Conclusion: Institutional Sevā and Guru Persona*

This chapter has examined how publicity sevā elevated the status and augmented the powers of BAPS' most famous guru, Pramukh Swami Maharaj. The establishment of sevā departments for Press and Public Relations leading up to the 1981 Bicentenary Celebration institutionalized Pramukh Swami's approach to publicity and extended his communication style through the many sevaks who embody his message to the public. His new guru persona was formed in his printed mediations, which made him out to be an approachable, caring friend to all mankind. At the same time, he became a towering figure of Indian history and Hindu reform, in the lineage of Swami Dayananda, Swami Vivekananda, and Mahatma Gandhi. Through the press, Pramukh Swami became capable of materializing "rational masses" at BAPS celebrations and quelling violence in Gujarat with his Akshardham response. Devotees believe Svāminārāyaṇ's divinity granted his publicity the power to uplift society and usher in lasting peace. His connections with titans of industry, politics, and religion made Pramukh Swami an ambassador of Hinduism with global influence, especially at a time when Hindu Nationalism is dominant in India. By the time of his passing in 2016, he was the "father" of Narendra Modi, whose BJP government later facilitated the pan-Hindu UAE temple Pramukh Swami envisioned.

However, I suggest, these guru powers are generated from below by the Press and Public Relations sevaks and the sevā institution that organizes them. The regular, routinized contacts between BAPS Press sevaks and reporters built Pramukh Swami's powerful guru persona, story by story, over the past four decades. Despite sevaks' denials that they never take proactive steps for coverage, members of the Gujarati press have come to expect BAPS' persistent and collegial engagement with their work more than any other religious group. Aakash is one sevak who keeps the Press Department running because he finds the work spiritually rewarding, bringing a greater sense of meaning to his life and turning him into an instrument of a divine plan. Likewise, PR

sevak Rohan feels transformed by his new communication skills, optimistic outlook, and ability to convey the guru's divinity to VIPs. These devotees perform publicity sevā to please the guru, which brings them closer to spiritual liberation after death. While they attribute the impact of their sevā to the guru's divinity, I argue the devotees' work creates that very divine persona. PR sevaks foster the VIP connections that generate the guru's global political capital, and Press sevaks spread the popular perception of Pramukh Swami as the leader of the Svāminārāyaṇ movement.

The overall system of publicity sevā furthers the interests of BAPS as an institution and upholds its reputation beyond the lifetime of any single guru. Establishing the sevā departments created a direct and reproducible connection between the spiritual motivations of devotees and the work of publicity. Now, regular departmental trainings produce a continual supply of sevaks who mimetically reproduce the guru's communication style and follow instructions of their supervising sādhus. Their long-term and systematic approach to publicity enables BAPS to avoid controversies and outlast other charismatic guru followings. BAPS avoids sensationalist media, such as cable news shows, favoring the subdued and respectable columns of religion beat reporters. This publicity sustains BAPS' public image and occasionally allows the institution to expand its influence. The PR Department helps BAPS Charities translate its guru-devoted sevā into grassroots volunteerism and speak the jargon of humanitarian non-profits. Spokesmen like Brahmvihari recast BAPS' international temple construction as evidence that "the whole world is one family." Even when controversies arise, the steady churn of positive stories assisted by BAPS' publicity sevaks eventually overshadow their critics and maintain BAPS' reputation in the Gujarati press.

The training and vetting process for BAPS sevaks is much longer than the afternoon session that Rohan described with Bahmvihari Swami. From childhood through adulthood, BAPS devotees are educated and tested via a standardized curriculum and annual testing schedule. These

“Satsang Exams” are a crucial undertaking that standardizes Hindu educations and undergirds the sevak infrastructure throughout BAPS transnational network. The next chapter turns to examine Satsang Exams, their massive demographic success, and the variety of motivations that bring tens of thousands of BAPS devotees into the testing room each year.

Both Publicity sevā and Satsang Exams solidify BAPS’ claim to leadership of the Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy by mass mediating the belief that its gurus inherit Sahajānand Svāmī’s spiritual authority. Publicity sevā is the outward-facing project that influences public theological understanding of the Svāminārāyaṇ tradition, with frequent success in transferring BAPS’ bhakti visuality into the press. Still, the popular reception of public mediation is notoriously difficult to predict. Even in the Gujarati press, where BAPS is so dominant, sevak never know if audiences will appreciate, complicate, appropriate, modify, mock, or reject their mediations. However, with its internal, devotee-facing mediations, BAPS can exert far more control over its audience. The next chapter analyzes standardized testing as a form of mass mediation with a distinctive capacity to monitor and regulate audience internalization. The uniform study materials and questions of Satsang Exams correct unorthodox beliefs among devotees and erase the history of other Svāminārāyaṇ organizations. The perceived objectivity and meritocracy of standardized testing obscure the Exams’ sectarian aims of codifying the BAPS guru lineage as Sahajānand Svāmī’s authentic and exclusive spiritual heirs. In the process, I argue, Satsang Exams also create a new form of guru omniscience as the all-seeing examiner of his test-taking devotees.

Chapter Four: Testing Satsaᅅg:  
Standardized Testing, Meritocratic Faith, and Guru Omniscience

*Through these books, it is intended to impart systematic, sustained and pure knowledge in a simple language on a scholastic basis to the children and youth of the Satsaᅅg. It is hoped that [BAPS...] will, through this activity, preach the ideals and noble traditions of the Sampradaya and through it, the culture of the Hindu religion.*

Pramukh Swami, 1972<sup>1</sup>

*Entering a Testing Satsaᅅg*

The “Satsaᅅg Exam” program is a seven-year standardized testing system that teaches young and new BAPS satsaᅅgis (members) about the group’s sectarian guru lineage and interpretation of Svāminārāyaᅅ theology. Pramukh Swami first instituted standardized testing for his devotees in 1972, and now tens of thousands of devotees take these tests every year. BAPS gurus ask devotees to take the exams to become full members of the satsaᅅg (community) for their ethical self-betterment, and their ultimate liberation after death. Many devotees take the tests as an expression of their love for the guru and as a means of “actively becoming Hindu.” As one of the world’s largest transnational Hindu organizations, BAPS’ Satsaᅅg Exams program deserves scholarly attention as a dominant force reshaping global Hindu education today. By studying the rise of BAPS’ Satsaᅅg Exams we can understand what kind of religious infrastructure is effective in building a transnational Hindu institution and how diasporic growth engenders standardization of theological education.

This chapter explores both BAPS’ institutional goals and the individual, devotee motivations that have made Satsaᅅg Exams so consistently popular. Pramukh Swami explained the goals of BAPS Satsaᅅg Exams clearly in their inaugural year, and the opening quote is still printed as part of his blessing in the front of exam study books. The guru intends to “impart

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<sup>1</sup> Pramukh Swami, “Blessing,” in *Ghanshyam Charitra*, trans. BAPS Sadhus (Ahmedabad: Swaminarayan Aksharpith, 2010), vii.

systematic, sustained and pure knowledge” to his devotees on a mass, transnational scale with minimal one-on-one teaching, that is, the traditional mode of guru-disciple education. BAPS leaders are interested in consistent training and uniform religious education for their young members, which incorporates new members into BAPS and trains volunteers to conduct many of their devotional programs independent of the guru and his sādhus. As we will see, Satsang Exams enable BAPS to train and vet massive numbers of devotees—48,000 test-takers per year—whose free labor operates their network of temples, including the Akshardham temple complex in Delhi, and mass events, like New Jersey’s 1991 Cultural Festival of India.

In two different senses, this chapter argues that the Satsang Exam program gives the guru powers of omniscience within BAPS: first, as the head of the educational institution, and second, in the perception of BAPS devotees. Satsang Exams give the guru and BAPS leadership insight into the minds of tens of thousands of test-takers through their results each year. Standardized tests gather as much information on devotees as they disseminate to them. BAPS’ standardized grading procedures give the institution a massive yet accessible data set on their transnational network of devotees. The institution is thus able to assess and vet masses of new devotees by a common rubric. The accumulated testing archive gives the guru a deep institutional memory and transnational access to any devotee’s knowledge. The guru’s unfettered access to detailed, personal information on every devotee can be understood as an institutional omniscience. He occupies a panoptic position, from which he can know the devotee’s testing results and any data BAPS has gathered. Secondly, devotee participation in Satsang Exams also reinforces a widespread belief in the guru’s omniscience. In BAPS’ version of Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, the guru is understood to be antaryāmī (the “indwelling driver”). The antaryāmī is the form of God, parabrahman, that resides within all

beings, knows all of their thoughts and feeling, and guides their actions.<sup>2</sup> Devotees experience the rigorous, anonymous grading as an “objective,” God-eye-view of their knowledge. The enforced accountability of the examination process ingrains many devotees with the belief that the guru is always watching and knows how committed they are to the satsaṅg. Devotees report feeling motivated to please him in the exam room and feeling validated by him when they receive a high score. Some experience his antaryāmī power during Satsang Exams, when the guru knows they need help and provides them answers. Others experience it afterward, when he acknowledges and rewards their hard work and sometimes changes their habits.

This testing program gives rise to a Hindu study ethic and an “objective” understanding of BAPS theology as a set of falsifiable, testable facts. In Joanne Punzo Waghorne’s study of new guru educational programs, she found an “amalgam of academic and business models” that “clouded the meaning of terms like *study*, *research*, *course*, and even *education*.”<sup>3</sup> Gurus and their surrogate instructors present themselves as “professors,” curating meetings with the trappings of a university classroom, and citing academic studies on psychology and biology, for example, to verify the benefits of yoga. Such movements present the guru’s years of yogic practice as “research” and his level of expertise as a “Ph.D.” In this way, contemporary gurus cater to an educated, business-class clientele and encourage devotees to internalize their devotional practice in academic terms. Likewise, for many devotees in BAPS, the sheer volume of reading and multi-year study requirement analogizes theology with the physical and biological sciences. New BAPS publications are treated as cutting-edge research, and even the most informed devotees must

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<sup>2</sup> Sadhu Paramtattvadas, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 327.

<sup>3</sup> Joanne Punzo Waghorne, “Engineering an Artful Practice: On Jaggi Vasudev’s Isha Yoga and Sri Sri Ravi Shankar’s Art of Living,” in *Gurus of Modern Yoga*, ed. Mark Singleton and Ellen Goldberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 288.

regularly update their knowledge. BAPS' study ethic pairs rote memorization with guru mimesis; when devotees read and memorize BAPS hagiographies of their guru lineage, they also internalize the guru's way of life and feel changed thereby. Satsang Exams' perceived objectivity proves that BAPS theology is ontologically true and it naturalizes the study ethic as an inherent attribute of Hindu identity.

The Satsang Exam program has made BAPS into a testing satsang, with a meritocratic spirituality that quantifies devotion through test scores and an all-knowing guru who rewards the highest achievers. The guru promises that devotees who pass Satsang Exams will be successful in this life and the next, and devotees in India and the US live by faith in him and his tests. The Exam's numerical scoring and BAPS' veneration of "toppers," top-score winners, engenders a meritocratic mentality of guru-devotion, a faith that hard work and achievement bring one to the upper levels of BAPS and a heightened spiritual state. This meritocracy expects constant improvement of one's devotion through rote memorization, rather than the classically understood, affective dimension of bhakti as a personalized, emotional connection with God and guru. Ajantha Subramanian's *The Caste of Merit* analyzes how mass-examinations disguise social stratification with an appearance of modern meritocracy, from the colonial Indian Civil Service exam to the contemporary coaching industry around the Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT) entrance exam. IIT alumni point to the national competition of its JEE entrance exam as the gold standard of impartial assessment; as Subramanian notes, "the JEE has come to represent a shining example of the incorruptibility of the IITs."<sup>4</sup> The IITs are perceived as immune to nepotism, societal influence, or financial corruption, which Subramanian argues, obscures the new consolidation of upper-caste

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<sup>4</sup> Ajantha Subramanian, *The Caste of Merit: Engineering Education in India* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019), 171.

privilege formed on IIT campuses. Satsang Exams impute such mythical impartiality to the guru, as the ultimate, impartial arbiter of Svāminārāyaṇ devotional merit, which I argue, obscures their institution-building mission for BAPS and the sectarian nature of his spiritual claims.

### *Institutional History of Satsang Exams*

The *Satsang Patrikā* first announced Satsang Exams on February 14, 1972 and introduced the tests as “**A priceless gift for our beloved children** [bold original].”<sup>5</sup> Instructions circulated in the *Patrikā* over the following months for the “Youth Satsang Beginning Exam.”<sup>6</sup> The BAPS Publications Wing released three books and sold them in temples for 80, 100, and 125 Rupees apiece. The first three books were: 1) *Ghaṅṣyām Caritra*, the miraculous childhood stories of Sahajānand Svāmī; 2) *Kiśor Satsang Prārambh*, a compilation of moral stories, songs, prayers, and explanations of worship rituals; and 3) *Yogījī Mahārāj*, a hagiography of the second BAPS guru. Temple leaders encouraged all devotees over the age of eleven to read the books and prepare for the exams, which were to be conducted simultaneously on the second Sunday of July. While the newsletter noted that any devotee—male or female, young or old—could sit for exams, it made clear the main focus was on young devotees. The exams were new to BAPS but built upon years of programming for children and youth.

In the 1950s and ‘60s, Yogiji Maharaj became known for promoting children’s activities in the satsang and supporting their education, both inside and outside of satsang. Yogiji made special efforts to support Gujarati students; he founded the BAPS youth group (yuvak maṇḍal) program in 1952, supported annual youth conferences in Gujarat and East Africa, and invested in BAPS student hostels at Gujarat’s new universities. Through the *Patrikā*, BAPS also encouraged

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<sup>5</sup> *Satsang Patrikā*, February 14, 1972, 2: “**āpanā koḍilā baḷako maṭe amūlya bhet.**”

<sup>6</sup> *Satsang Patrikā*, April 3, 1972, 2: “Kiśor satsang prārambh parīkṣā.”

devotees to support students during their school exams. For example, on February 13, 1957, the newsletter requested youth group leaders to,

take a personal interest in their studies so they have enough time to read and keep watch so the surroundings are solitary and easy for reading; that is our humble request. Studies are the first personal duty (svadharma) for the youth, and only after that turn to a life of svadharma developing the satsaṅg, full of thought and discernment; that will please [Yogiji].<sup>7</sup>

The announcement compared the student's duty to study with Arjuna's svadharma to fight in the *Mahābhārata*. Thus, the newsletter's language frames the importance of exams in explicit dharmic terms and reminds readers of the devotional stakes of pleasing the guru by fulfilling his request. BAPS urged youth group leaders to provide practical support in their success in the high-stakes, competitive testing; under Yogiji, BAPS took an interest in the education of their youth and connected satsaṅg activities with their exams.

Through his years of enthusiastic preaching, Yogiji inspired many young Gujaratis who eventually became devotees of Bhagvān Svāminārāyaṇ and followed Yogiji as their guru. A later *Svāminārāyaṇ Prakāś* article narrated the origin of Satsang Exams as a method for the guru to organize his student devotees even from long distances: "Because of his inspiration and follow-ups, the program slowly, slowly started to seem serious, and a conscious society of village youths began to prepare."<sup>8</sup> As Yogiji constantly traveled around Gujarat and Mumbai, youth groups would gather whenever he visited the area. However, young devotees proved inconsistent practitioners, and the groups would dissipate once the guru moved on. As an institution, BAPS struggled to

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<sup>7</sup> *Satsaṅg Patrikā*, February 13, 1957, 1: "Adhikārīṇe temnā abhyāsmā aṅgat ras lai teone pūrto vāncvāno ṭāim maḷe ane vāncvānū vātāvaraṇ ekāntvālū ane sugam thāy enī takedārī rākhe evī amārī namra vinantī che. Yuvako maṭe abhyās ej temno pratham svadharma che ane pachīj vicār ane vivekpūrṇ satsaṅgnī pravṛtino svadharma jīvanmā utāre toj svāmīśrījī rāji thāse."

<sup>8</sup> BAPS sādhus, "Satsang Education Exam Silver Anniversary," *Svāminārāyaṇ Prakāś*, July 1997, 7: "Emnī satat prerṇā ne folo-apne kāraṇe dhīredhīre ā pravṛtito saṅgin thavā lāgi ne gāmogām bāḷayuvānono jāgrat samāj taiyār thavā lāgyo."

maintain regular attendance at their weekly youth group assemblies: “For the most part there was a great loss of volunteers who would constantly guide the youths with discourses and fellowship in the satsaṅg centers.”<sup>9</sup> BAPS was interested in a new set of volunteers who could keep youth engaged and lead their Sunday youth group assemblies while the guru was away. BAPS leaders “started to think about how to make its management and development more systematic.”<sup>10</sup> Early conversations around Satsaṅg Exams began an effort to routinize the personal, emotional connection to the guru and regularize participation in the youth groups.

The BAPS plan to train young volunteers was distinctive among Svāminārāyaṅ organizations because of its particular aim of systematic theological knowledge. BAPS sādhus identified shortcomings in youth participation as a lack of knowledge: “the number of youth furnished with knowledge (jñān) and understanding of the Sampradāy was very low.”<sup>11</sup> Svāminārāyaṅ discourse often names jñān as one of four key virtues for a devotee: dharma (duty), jñān (knowledge), vairāgya (detachment), and bhakti (devotion). In the *Vacanāmṛt*, Sahajānand Svāmī discusses jñān as a necessary precondition for spiritual liberation.<sup>12</sup> The BAPS sādhus of the 1960s drew on this Svāminārāyaṅ discourse of jñān when they resolved to educate more young devotees. Their choice to focus on jñān as the problem instead of emotional bhakti or proper dharma would impact the future members the testing would attract. Successful students saw their aptitude for testing rewarded within BAPS. Their teaching method also shifted from the traditional

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<sup>9</sup> BAPS sādhus, “Silver Anniversary,” 7: “Moṭā bhāgnā baḷ-yuvā satsaṅg kendromā tene kathāvārtā ne satsaṅghī satat mārgdarśan ne preṅṅā āptā rahe tevā kāryakartāonī moṭī khoṭ hatī.”

<sup>10</sup> BAPS sādhus, “Silver Anniversary,” 7: “tenā vadhu vyavasthit sancālan āne vikās māte sau prayatnaśīl banī vicārvā lāgyā.”

<sup>11</sup> BAPS sādhus, “Silver Anniversary,” 7: “sāmpradāyik jñān ne samajānāmā susajaj yuvānonī samkhyā ghaṅī ochī hatī.”

<sup>12</sup> For example, in the *Vacanāmṛt*, Loya 7, Sahajānand Svāmī addresses the question of what knowledge leads to spiritual liberation states that one must “know God perfectly” to receive his grace. The process of attaining full knowledge of God included training of the senses, the mind, and bodily experience. BAPS Sādhus trans., *The Vachanamrut: Spiritual Discourses of Bhagwan Swaminarayan* (Ahmedabad: Swaminarayan Aksharpath, 2010), 310.

in-person discussions with the guru to a transnational standardized curriculum. Instead of increased personal contact with the guru, BAPS increased their young devotees' time reading their textbooks.

BAPS sādhus began work on a curriculum for young devotees in 1967, when the organization was proliferating in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. In this transnational context, the goal of this curriculum was that “standardized training can be given to all. Harmony can be maintained and the principles and discourses and knowledge of the Sampradāy will flower nicely.”<sup>13</sup> The standardization of religious knowledge, in their view, would transcend national boundaries and solidify a spiritual community. BAPS sādhus began working on a set of textbooks for their youth groups, but the same diasporic condition that necessitated standardization also rendered it difficult to implement. The sādhus were concerned they had no way to guarantee a uniformity of understanding from their publications; they worried: “back in each group, they would have to search through the textbooks and each according to their own perspective would find different details, so consolidation would not be saved.”<sup>14</sup> BAPS leaders viewed individual devotee interpretations of scripture as another problem to be solved. In contrast, other Svāminārāyaṇ groups have traditionally reserved a precise and consistent level of theological education for their sādhus and expected less stringent training for householding devotees.

Organizational leaders of other Svāminārāyaṇ temples place their central focus on overall temple engagement from the householding devotees rather than the uniformity of belief. For example, the Ācārya of the Ahmedabad Gadi once introduced me to the theological debate among Svāminārāyaṇ's earliest followers on whether he was spiritually superior to Krishna or vice versa. I asked him what the correct answer was, but he was not interested in closing the question. The

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<sup>13</sup> BAPS sādhus, “Silver Anniversary,” 7: “Ekasarakhī satsaṅg tālīm saune āpī śakāy. Siddhānt ke kathāomāñ ekabaddhatā jaḷavāy ane sampradāyānā jñānanī puṣṭi sārī rīte thai śake.”

<sup>14</sup> BAPS sādhus, “Silver Anniversary,” 7—8: “pāchū darek maṇḍaḷne sandarbh grantho śodhvā paḍe ne sau pot-potānī dṛṣṭi pramāṇe alag vigato tārave to paṇ ekasūtratā sacavāy nahi.”

Ācārya shook his head and repeated to me, “This is the debate.” Over time he conveyed to me that his role is to maintain debates like this rather than resolve them. He later referred me to one of his leading sādhus to discuss the temple’s official theological position. His son, the current Ācārya, also explained his disinclination to standardize devotional programs, saying, “We do not want clones.” For him, the *Vacanāmṛt*’s beauty is its debates and the lively, sometimes raucous, dynamic of the discourse. People shouted at Bhagvān Svāminārāyaṇ, interrupted him, and boldly disagreed with him. The Ācārya contrasted the debates of the *Vacanāmṛt* with the contemporary spiritual discourses given in many Svāminārāyaṇ temples, which he bemoans as stilted, unidirectional lecturing. “Does anyone do this today? Interrupt the sādhus? No, they just listen.” He said the formalized Svāminārāyaṇ education of today has lost the passion for truth that hallmarked the early following.

For BAPS sādhus in the late-1960s, however, theological debates had grown overly raucous, such that their satsaṅg appeared on the brink of dissolution. Dadubhai Patel, a former householding leader in BAPS and the original publisher of the *Patrikā* newsletter, separated from BAPS in 1966, along with a number of devotees (see Chapter 2). The controversy with Dadubhai prompted BAPS to reassess its work in devotional publications to prevent further fractures. Dadubhai’s newsletter instructed devotees on how to conduct their own weekly devotional assemblies, which enhanced the profile of both BAPS and Dadubhai himself among Gujaratis in East Africa. However, Dadubhai also preached on beliefs that were unorthodox in BAPS, like the initiation of female devotees as renunciants alongside the male sādhus. After Dadubhai’s separation from BAPS, he continued claiming divine authority from Yogiji Maharaj, and became the guru of his own organization, called the “Yogi Divine Society” (YDS). Around thirty BAPS sādhus defected to join the YDS and accepted Dadubhai as their guru. The sādhus who remained

within BAPS thus realized the spiritual authority that flowed from the control of mass media. They looked for a new medium to refocus devotees on their guru lineage.

In the context of the tumultuous years around Dadubhai's departure, the BAPS publications team turned to standardized testing as their means of reorienting the satsaᅅg and spreading uniform jñān. With these Satsaᅅg Exams, BAPS could train new volunteer leaders to speak about BAPS theology and correct unorthodox beliefs, like Dadubhai's. Thus the Exam system was designed to foster theological uniformity in BAPS: "corresponding textbooks were prepared and standard, ready-made literature was given to all, that way there would be faith in the Vedic Akᅅar-Puruᅅottam theology established by Shastriji Maharaj."<sup>15</sup> By testing devotees on theological knowledge, BAPS introduced a mental discipline to the guru-bhakti that compelled many youths to follow Yogiji. The Exams were not merely spreading knowledge of Svāminārāyaᅅ for its own sake; they would temper new members' devotional enthusiasm and protect BAPS from further fracture. The sādhu-led program privileged the virtue of jñān more than other Svāminārāyaᅅ organizations and did so in a way that was designed to solidify the BAPS community.

BAPS promoted the legacy of its sectarian guru lineage and codified its teaching on their divine lives through Satsaᅅg Exams. Yogiji Maharaj passed away in January of 1971, one year before the Exams began, but he is still remembered within BAPS as the inspiration behind Satsaᅅg Exams. According to *Svāminārāyaᅅ Prakāś*, Yogiji reviewed and approved the first exam textbook on Svāminārāyaᅅ's childhood stories. He expressed his hope for the Satsaᅅg Exam program, saying, "Thousands of youth will study brahmavidyā [knowledge of God] through this program,

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<sup>15</sup> BAPS sādhus, "Silver Anniversary," 8: "Tethī tene lagatā pāᅅhyapustako j taiyār karvā ne saune pramāᅅabhūt taiyār sāhitya āpvū, jethī śrījīmahārājnā ādarś mujab brahmasvarūp śāstrījī mahārāj sthāpit Vaidik akᅅarpuruᅅottam upāsanā dᅅᅅh thāy."

and the Satsang Education Exams will become a seat of knowledge for brahmavidyā.”<sup>16</sup> Yogiji often set ambitious goals for the growth of BAPS programs, and Satsang Exams were no exception. If one thousand people attended a BAPS event, he would say, next year, there should be five thousand here. After his passing, BAPS sādhus added a short hagiographic text on Yogiji’s life to the first Exam, reinforcing their claim to his spiritual legacy, over and against the Yogi Divine Society’s.

BAPS announced its plans for the new standardized tests through the *Patrikā* in early 1972, and as with Waghorne’s contemporary gurus, Satsang Exams blended the devotional with the academic. The exam date was set for the second Sunday in July to accommodate the schedules of Indian students and farmers. Students would be on vacation, and the monsoon rains would stop farm work by then. The Exams were designed as a group activity; tests could not be taken individually. The *Patrikā* instructed each temple to form an exam center (*parīkṣā kendra*) with a study group of fifteen test-takers at a minimum.<sup>17</sup> The temples also needed two adult volunteer supervisors (*nirīkṣaks*) to monitor the test-takers and initiate the Exam with an *ārtī* ritual before BAPS mūrtis—of Akshar Purushottam or the BAPS guru lineage—who were to preside over each examination room.<sup>18</sup> BAPS established a central office and devotee Exam Minister (*parīkṣā mantrī*) in Mumbai’s Dadar neighborhood, and the newsletter instructed local temples to mail their completed answer sheets to the Mumbai temple by July 14.<sup>19</sup> These instructions combined elements of standardized testing and devotional ritual to fashion Satsang Exams as formal Hindu schooling within BAPS.

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<sup>16</sup> BAPS sādhus, “Silver Anniversary,” 8: “Ā pravṛtti dvārā hajāro yuvāno brahmavidyā bhāṇe ane satsaṅg śikṣaṇ parīkṣā brahmavidyā pravṛttinī jñānpīṭh bane.”

<sup>17</sup> *Satsaṅg Patrikā*, April 3, 1972, 2. Other announcements followed in *Satsaṅg Patrikā*, April 24, 1972, and *Satsaṅg Patrikā*, May 22, 1972.

<sup>18</sup> *Satsaṅg Patrikā*, July 3, 1972, 2.

<sup>19</sup> *Satsaṅg Patrikā*, April 24, 1972, 2.

BAPS celebrated the Satsang Exam toppers as exemplary, ranked devotees based on score, and began assembling its archive of testing results. The first Exams were held on Sunday, July 9, 1972, from 11:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., and 2056 BAPS devotees took the *parīkṣā* in fifty-four different centers, primarily located in India but some outside the subcontinent.<sup>20</sup> Out of one hundred possible marks, devotees had to receive a minimum of forty-five marks to pass. A special, four-page edition of the *Satsaṅg Patrikā* published the results of the first Satsang Exam on August 14, 1972. The newsletter listed the names of the top ten adult scorers, the top five young men and young women, top five boys and girls, and the registration numbers for all test-takers who scored over seventy marks.<sup>21</sup> BAPS congratulated those with the highest scores and circulated their names around the satsaṅg readership, like Dhirajlal Rekha in first place with ninety-nine out of one hundred marks. Overall, 1478 of the 2056 test-takers received passing marks, around 72%. BAPS recorded this first batch of devotee results, which assigned a merit-based ranking to devotees and established its institutional testing archive.

By the time it announced these first results, the newsletter had already begun circulating information for next year and the second level of Exams called *Praveś*.<sup>22</sup> In the 1970s, Pramukh Swami and the Publications department initiated a publishing campaign in preparation for the Swaminarayan Bicentenary Celebration in 1981, and Satsang Exams grew quickly as a result. BAPS published new Exams and textbooks every year from 1972 to 1979, culminating in the seven-level Exam system that continues today. BAPS required that devotees earn passing marks on the first Exam before moving on to the next. The first four Exam levels—*Prārambh* (Beginning), *Praveś* (Entry), *Paricay* (Introduction), and *Pravīṇ* (Proficient)—remain standard for

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<sup>20</sup> *Satsaṅg Patrikā*, June 26, 1972, 2, and *Satsaṅg Patrikā* August 14, 1972, 2. BAPS temples in Nairobi and London also conducted Satsang Exams in the first year.

<sup>21</sup> Kishor Dave, *Satsaṅg Patrikā*, August 14, 1972, 2—3.

<sup>22</sup> *Satsaṅg Patrikā*, July 31, 1972, 2.

devotees in their teens and twenties, while older and fewer devotees continued to the upper three Exams—*Prājñā* (wise)-1, -2, and -3. BAPS later introduced two preliminary levels of Exams for children—*Bal-1* and -2—which also drew large numbers of test-takers. The children’s Exams have also expanded to a five-tier, five-year program in recent years. From a single test in 1972, Satsang Exams developed into a comprehensive Hindu education system for devotees of any age.

Since the 1970s, the BAPS offices in Ahmedabad have developed the staff and infrastructure necessary to operate this Satsang Exam system indefinitely. In 1973, BAPS hired a Mumbai high school principal, Ravibhai Patel, to oversee its Exam system, which he did for over twenty years. Patel established the BAPS Exam Department (*parīkṣā vibhāg*) in Ahmedabad and the internal bureaucracy that still handles Satsang Exams today. At present, the Exam Department has a staff of twenty employees: ten male and ten female, all of whom are also devotees, working full-time in offices at the Shahibaug temple. The staff conducts clerical work behind Satsang Exams; they coordinate with temples around transnational network and register test-takers through an online system called “SEeR,” or Satsang Exam e-Registration.<sup>23</sup> The staff posts previous years’ Exams with answer sheets on their website, along with the syllabus and Exam rules.<sup>24</sup> The Exam staff distributes a practice test for devotees three months before their official Satsang Exam. The Exams currently operate on two annual cycles: foreign and domestic. The Exam Department administers foreign Exams in March and announces their results in May. The Department then administers domestic Indian Exams in July and announces the results in September. Registration for the following year’s Exam arrives soon after in the Fall. The administration of Satsang Exams is thus full-time, year-round work for the devotee-employees in the BAPS Exam Department.

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<sup>23</sup> “BAPS Satsang Exams and Satsang Exam e-Registration,” BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, Swaminarayan Aksharpith, accessed September 26, 2019, <https://www.bapsatsangexams.org/Account/SignIn>.

<sup>24</sup> “Satsang Exam Study Materials,” BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, Swaminarayan Aksharpith, accessed September 14, 2018, <https://www.baps.org/SatsangExam/Studymaterials.aspx>.

The labor behind Satsang Exam administration is divided by gender and between sādhus, staff, and sevaks. BAPS' male sādhus write the Exam questions every year from their sādhu-training ashram in Sarangpur, Gujarat. The Exam Department's responsibility is to copy-edit their questions, compile them onto exam forms, and translate them into three languages: Gujarati, Hindi, and English. However, only male staffers can communicate with the sādhus who oversee and give final approval for each Exam.<sup>25</sup> When devotees take the Exams, BAPS temples also separate them into male and female groups; for example, see photographs from London's 2012 Satsang Exams in Figure 4.1. The completed exams are graded by another set of devotees, roughly four hundred female BAPS devotees who live around Gujarat. The Ahmedabad staff sends each grader around one hundred Exams and asks them to return in fifteen days.<sup>26</sup> These women complete all grading by hand, even for the multiple-choice questions. "Why women?" I asked, and a BAPS sādhu told me, "Women because they have more time at home; they're knowledgeable, and they can give full attention to the Exams." This gendered division of labor makes Satsang Exams written by men, graded by women, and administered under gender segregation.

BAPS created Satsang Exams in the early-1970s to reconsolidate its transnational community. The program was designed not merely to teach about Svāminārāyaṇ but also to build the institution of BAPS. The Exams enable BAPS gurus to educate far greater numbers of devotees than they could reach individually and guarantee a uniformity of instruction that enthusiastic devotees alone could not. Over the years, as the Exam Department tabulates and records each round of Exam results, the testing archive steadily expands the institution's knowledge of its devotees. The Satsang Exam system augments the guru's power to manage and know his massive

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<sup>25</sup> Exam Minister, personal interview, May 17, 2018, Ahmedabad.

<sup>26</sup> Exam Minister, personal interview, May 2018.

devotee following, ranking each *satsaᅅgi*'s merit by test score. The following section now turns to the content of Exam readings and the “objective” Exam format that obscures the sectarian nature of its teaching.



Figure 4.2: Two groups of test-takers in 2012 at the BAPS London temple. Young girls (left) sit for one of the early Exams, and a group of old and young men (right) take an advanced Exam. Source: “Satsaᅅg Shikshaᅅn Pariksha 2012, London, UK,” BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, Swaminarayan Aksharpath, March 4, 2012, [www.baps.org/Photos/2012/Exam-5291.aspx?mid=35137](http://www.baps.org/Photos/2012/Exam-5291.aspx?mid=35137).

### The “Objective” Content of Satsaᅅg Exams

Pramukh Swami and Mahant Swami have urged devotees to take Satsaᅅg Exams, and direct requests from the guru are most effective in convincing devotees to participate. The 1997 *Prakāś*'s article published a message from Pramukh Swami on the importance of submitting Satsaᅅg Exams. His message begins,

We think these are children's Exams, but what about adults? Satsaᅅg education is necessary for everyone. We are all children in satsaᅅg. In satsaᅅg there is so much left to learn and understand. Just as you've gained knowledge for work and business, you should gain this knowledge. When you gain this knowledge of satsaᅅg there will be peace in your life.<sup>27</sup>

Pramukh Swami's message addresses adult satsaᅅgis and explains his expectation that they will all sit for Satsaᅅg Exams. Pramukh Swami compares the Satsaᅅg Exams to specialized career

<sup>27</sup> Pramukh Swami, “Silver Anniversary,” 8: “āpᅅne lāge ke ā bālakonī parīkᅅā che, vaᅅᅅlone śū? Paᅅ satsaᅅgnū śīkᅅaᅅn badhāne jarūrī che. Satsaᅅg karvāmā badhā bālak j che. Satsaᅅgmā haju ghaᅅᅅ samajvānū-śīkhvānū bākī che. Dhandhā-vyavasāyanū jñān meᅅavyū tem ā jñān meᅅavavānū che. Ā satsaᅅgnū jñān haᅅe to jīvanmā śānti raheᅅe.”

training and promises peace to those devotees who take the Exams. Since 2016, Mahant Swami's message on Satsang Exams has been concise but powerful, famously saying, "The Fruit of Satsang Exams is Akṣardhām" (the abode of God). With Pramukh Swami and Mahant Swami's direct requests for all devotees to take Exams, associating their successful completion with ultimate spiritual rewards, hundreds of thousands of devotees have read the Satsang Exam study books in order to please their guru.

BAPS gurus are the Exams' chief promoters as well as a central feature of the Exams' materials. The content of the Satsang Exam readings reveals what jñān BAPS leaders consider essential for devotees. These books contain the narratives and poetics that undergird the Svāminārāyaṇ discourse in all BAPS temples. The Satsang Exam books prioritize the life of Bhagvān Svāminārāyaṇ and the figures in BAPS' sectarian guru lineage. The books also introduce readers to the prominent early figures in the Sampradāy and the genre of moral stories and miraculous incidents that BAPS sādhus regularly cite while preaching. While early readings only define select theological terms, later texts beginning with the *Pravīṇ* (fourth level) Exam deal extensively with BAPS' overall theological system.

By foregrounding the lives of its gurus, Satsang Exams spread the understanding of BAPS as direct inheritors of the Svāminārāyaṇ tradition. The first four exams are the most popular, and their accompanying texts constitute the common knowledge base among most BAPS devotees. Each of the Exams covers at least one hagiography of a guru in the BAPS lineage, starting with Yogiji Maharaj on the first Exam and working backward, with his guru Shastriji Maharaj (d. 1951) on the second Exam, then his guru Bhagatji Maharaj (d.1895) on the third Exam, then his guru Guṇātītānand Svāmī (d. 1867) on the fourth Exam. The fourth exam also covers a compilation of stories on Pramukh Swami (d. 2016). The guru lineage is central to all BAPS teaching, as it

connects the organization to the spiritual authority of Svāminārāyaṇ. In addition to the lives of the BAPS gurus, the first three Exams also cover the life of Bhagvān Svāminārāyaṇ (d. 1831): his miraculous childhood stories on the first Exam, his teenage pilgrimage and austerities on the second Exam, and his adult life and founding of the Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy on the third Exam. These books constitute roughly half the required reading for the Exams and emphasize Bhagvān Svāminārāyaṇ's life and his connection to BAPS through the lives of every figure in the guru lineage. No other Svāminārāyaṇ organization accepts this particular lineage, but BAPS teaches it early and often to naturalize its status as a leader of the movement.

Devotees who take these four Exams also progress through two series of books that introduce historical figures in satsaṅg and key terms in BAPS theology. One series of books—*Satsaṅg Reader 1, 2, and 3*—introduces a variety of important figures in the early community, such as the first sādhus who recorded Sahajānand Svāmī's discourses and composed devotional songs, other householding devotees who supported Sahajānand, and some later figures who contributed to the founding of BAPS. Another series of books—*Kishore Satsaṅg 1, 2, 3, and 4*—are most similar to school textbooks in their compiling of Svāminārāyaṇ stories, songs, prayers, and Sanskrit verses for readers to memorize. Readers will also learn the rules of conduct for BAPS satsaṅgis, the stories behind Hindu festivals, and the histories of early Svāminārāyaṇ temples. These books also define selected theological terms, but on the fourth Exam readers are tested on another text, called *Akshar-Purushottam Upāsanā*, which synthesizes these terms and systematically explains BAPS's Akshar Purushottam theology. These two series of books give examinees the common knowledge—songs, stories, and concepts—to participate in BAPS sabhās and spiritual discourses.

After successfully completing the four main Exams, devotees can opt to take *Prājñā-1, -2, and -3*, which train them to become lay leaders within BAPS. Each *Prājñā* Exam comes with seven books, including sections of the *Vacanāmṛt*, and *Svāmīnī Vāto*, the sayings of Guṇātītānand Svāmī. There is also another series of longer, unillustrated hagiographies of Sahajānand and each BAPS guru and more texts on BAPS philosophy. Aware of the increased level of work and reading load entailed in these advanced Exams, BAPS gives examinees the option to submit just half of any *Prājñā* Exam during one year’s testing period, so long as they submit the second half the following year. Those who pass the *Prājñā* Exams are better able to deliver spiritual discourses and lead sabhā programs in BAPS temples.

The assessment of devotee knowledge is rendered purely meritocratic through the language of “objectivity.” According to the BAPS Exam Minister, they have always assessed devotee knowledge through “objective” questions, and their Exam forms have been formalized over the years.<sup>28</sup> His description tracks with the language of *Svāminārāyaṇ Prakāś* that explained the original intent was to “set objective question-sheets according to modern methods that test-takers will find easy and exciting.”<sup>29</sup> The Exam Minister says almost all Exam questions are either “pure objective” or “semi-objective.” Pure objective questions are multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, or short, one-sentence-answer questions that test memorization of the textbook material. Semi-objective questions test reading comprehension by asking test-takers to explain the main points of

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<sup>28</sup> Exam Minister, personal interview, May 2018.

<sup>29</sup> BAPS Sādhus, “Silver Anniversary,” 10: “ādhunīk rīt pramāṇe objekṭiv (objective) preśnapatro rākhavā jethī parīkṣārthīone ghaṇū sahelū paḍe ne utsāh jālavāī rahe.”

a given reading in four to five sentences. Figure 4.2 shows examples of “pure objective” questions from the 1976 *Pravīṇ* (fourth-level) Exam. The first question lists four quotes from the *Kiśor Satsaṅg Pravīṇ* textbook and asks test-takers to give the context and meaning for two quotes, worth five marks apiece. Test-takers are then asked to fill in the missing words for one of two quotations from the *Vacanāmṛt*, worth five marks. The “objective” marking system numericizes the value of each bit of information and reinforces perception of BAPS’ impartiality.

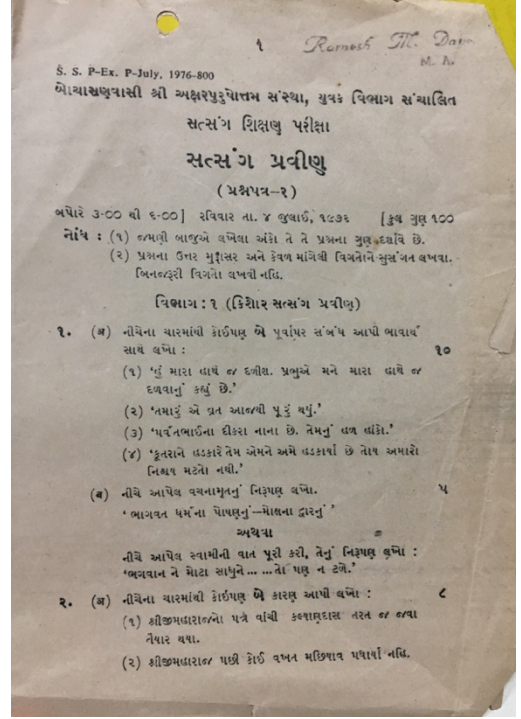


Figure 4.2: 1976 *Pravīṇ* Exam, 1.

The last question on this page from the 1976 Exam asks test-takers to explain two of the four listed incidents from the textbook, worth four marks apiece. For example, the first incident given is: “Reading [Sahajānand’s] letter, Kalyāṇdās was immediately ready to go.”<sup>30</sup> In Kalyāṇdās’ story, Sahajānand Svāmī writes a letter requesting several devotees to take initiation as sādhus. He lists them by name, ending with an “ādi” (etc.). Kalyāṇdās’ name was not included in the list. However, when he arrived with the others to take initiation, he told Sahajānand he was actually included in the letter as that “ādi.” Sahajānand was impressed by his devotion and gave him initiation that day. To receive full marks on this question, test-takers needed to write that Kalyāṇdās was included in the letter because he was the “ādi.”

In recent years, the “objective” question forms have become more precise and systematized for the grader’s convenience. In this way, the Exams achieve a high degree of “objectivity” as in

<sup>30</sup> *Satsaṅg Pravīṇ*, 1976, 1: śrījīmahārājno patra vāncī kalyāṇdās tarat j javā taiyār thayā.

professional, or mechanical objectivity that the BAPS Exam Department upholds. Their standards for assigning scores are rule-bound, transparent, and consistent. Over time the BAPS test rules were codified into a current list of eighteen rules that regulates Satsang Exams, down to the details.<sup>31</sup> For example, rules state that devotees must write their answers in either blue or black pen, “Answers written in more than one coloured ink will not be considered valid,” and neither will Exams with “more than one type of handwriting.”<sup>32</sup> Current Exam forms provide a

The image shows a sample page from the 2019 Paricay Exam. At the top, there is a header with fields for 'To be filled by Moderation Dept', 'Q.1 (Marks: 9)', 'Name', 'Q.2 (Marks: 4)', 'Name', 'Q.3 (Marks: 4)', 'Name', 'SSP/March 19/1,560', and 'Paricay 1'. Below this is the title 'SECTION 1: SAHAJANAND CHARITRA'. Section Q.1 consists of three numbered questions asking for speaker and listener information, each with a 9-mark box. Section Q.2 is a multiple-choice section with two questions and a 4-mark box. Section Q.3 is a fill-in-the-blanks section with four questions and a 4-mark box. Each section has a 'Total marks for above questions' box and a 'Write only this mark on main page' box. The page is numbered 'Paricay 1' and 'Parichay-First'.

Figure 4.3: 2019 Paricay Exam, 1.

set amount of space for examinees to write their answers, and rules state that answers written on extra pages will not be considered valid. Figure 4.3 shows the first page of the *Paricay* (third level) Exam from 2019 with its formalized question paper. The new Exam form reserves more space for graders, with boxes along the top, right side, and grey boxes between each set of questions. As devotees write their answers, the new forms visualize the fastidious, rule-bound grading process by which their scores will be tabulated. Test-taking devotees also express their appreciation for the Exam format as “modern” and “formalized education” because this formality enhances confidence in the accuracy and fairness of their scores.

There is only one “subjective” question on each Exam. The essay question appears on every Exam from the second level (*Praveś*) onward and often encourages examinees to discuss current

<sup>31</sup> “Satsang Examinations Important Rules,” BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, Swaminarayan Aksharpath, accessed October 31, 2019, <https://www.baps.org/Satsang-Exams/Rules.aspx>.

<sup>32</sup> “Satsang Examinations Important Rules,” <https://www.baps.org/Satsang-Exams/Rules.aspx>.

BAPS events. Test-takers are asked to write essays on the theological significance of, for example, regular fasting or ghar sabhā (home meetings). Essay prompts also ask test-takers to write essays on the gurus' lives, including the current guru and his recent travels abroad, which is distinctive of BAPS.<sup>33</sup> As I discuss later in this chapter, BAPS maintains a sense that no devotee should ever be finished studying, in part because the divine revelation of the guru's life is ongoing. The organization also uses the news of its transnational growth as the subject of essay questions. For example, in 2019, several Exams included essay prompts that asked test-takers to describe the guru's recent travels and projects in the diaspora. The *Paricay* (third level) Exam included an essay prompt on "Sydney: Festivals with Swamishri"<sup>34</sup> and the *Pravīṇ* (fourth level) included a prompt on "Satsang in New Zealand with Swamishri."<sup>35</sup> To receive full marks on these essays, devotees should write a full account of the former and current gurus' travels in Sydney or New Zealand: the places they visited, names of devotees they met, and descriptions of temple programs around their visit. These essay questions elevate the spiritual significance of the guru's current transnational organizing on par with Svāminārāyaṇ's original teaching.

The *Prājñā-3* (seventh-level) Exam in 2019 also included the essay prompt, "Pramukh Swami Maharaj's Spiritual Garden: Middle East,"<sup>36</sup> referring to BAPS' construction of a pan-Hindu temple in the United Arab Emirates. The temple was national Indian news in 2018. The Indian and UAE governments reached an agreement for, what was billed as "the UAE's first Hindu

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<sup>33</sup> In BAPS theology, Bhagvān Svāminārāyaṇ is understood to be continuously present on earth in the form of the guru. BAPS incorporates the guru's contemporary travels and activities into its teaching as new divine incidents (prasaṅgs). This distinguishes BAPS' teaching from that of the original Svāminārāyaṇ gādīs that focus on prasaṅgs from the life of Bhagvān Svāminārāyaṇ and his first generation of devotees.

<sup>34</sup> "Satsang Parichay : Paper - 1", March 2019, 7, via "Satsang Exam Study Materials," BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, Swaminarayan Aksharpath, accessed December 10, 2019, <https://www.baps.org/SatsangExam/Studymaterials.aspx#>.

<sup>35</sup> "Satsang Pravin : Paper - 1", March 2019, 14, via "Satsang Exam Study Materials," <https://www.baps.org/SatsangExam/Studymaterials.aspx#>.

<sup>36</sup> "Satsang Pragna - 3: Paper - 1", March 2019, 14, via "Satsang Exam Study Materials," <https://www.baps.org/SatsangExam/Studymaterials.aspx#>.

temple,” and the Modi government selected BAPS to construct the temple. According to the sample essay, a correct answer would include that Pramukh Swami was the first Hindu guru to visit the UAE in 1982 and that he predicted BAPS would build a temple there. The sample essay also describes temple construction as a world-historic achievement and argues it will improve global Hindu-Muslim relations.<sup>37</sup> Essay prompts and samples like these are posted online to guide test-takers’ preparation for essay questions on future Exams. In so doing, they inscribe transnational satsaᅅg news with spiritual value. Annual Satsaᅅg Exams quickly incorporate the latest news of the growing transnational institution as part of the shared knowledge of test-takers. They teach test-taking devotees to imagine themselves as part of a transnational community.

The Satsaᅅg Exam textbooks have successfully rewritten the history of the Svāminārāyaᅅ movement and recentered its spiritual authority within BAPS.<sup>38</sup> Devotees read the guru hagiographies as a positivist history of the movement, drawing a straight line from Sahajānand Svāmī to BAPS. Satsaᅅg Exams teach that Svāminārāyaᅅ’s divinity is continually present on earth in the form of the BAPS guru, so devotees have an open-ended imperative to study his ongoing work. Other Svāminārāyaᅅ organizations, like the Yogi Divine Society, are written out of Svāminārāyaᅅ history. This inherent sectarian bias is effaced at every step by BAPS’ presentation of its objective questions, standardized readings, and rigorous grading policies. The Exams’ perceived impartiality obscures their constructive theological aim of deifying BAPS’ gurus. Satsaᅅg Exams have proven the objective divinity of these gurus and their growing institution to

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<sup>37</sup> “Satsaᅅg Pragna - 3: Paper - 1”, via “Satsaᅅg Exam Study Materials,”

<https://www.baps.org/SatsaᅅgExam/Studymaterials.aspx#>.

<sup>38</sup> Cynthia Packert has also noted that all BAPS aesthetics, or its “bhakti visuality,” is shot through with representation of its guru lineage. The lineage is a constant and crucial lesson in BAPS temples, festivals, and media that orients observers within their particular vision of the Svāminārāyaᅅ tradition. Cynthia Packert, “From Gujarat to the Globe: ‘Bhakti Visuality’ and Identity in BAPS Svāminārāyaᅅ Hinduism,” *The Journal of Hindu Studies* 12 (2019): 192—223.

generations of examinees. As the following section explores, the sheer numbers of Satsang Exam takers ensure that BAPS' guru lineage and theology are the best known of any Svāminārāyaṇ sect around the world.

### *Growth of Satsang Exams*

Devotee participation in Satsang Exams swelled in the 1990s, coinciding with a period of rapid expansion for BAPS. Academic observers of BAPS have often looked elsewhere to explain its growth, particularly toward its massive public events. Internally, however, the Exams are acknowledged as a central accomplishment of the organization. On their twenty-fifth anniversary in 1997, *Svāminārāyaṇ Prakāś* celebrated Satsang Exams as a “fantastic program,” one of BAPS’ “proudest achievements” that has educated “approximately 500,000 knowledge-seekers as of today.”<sup>39</sup> BAPS leaders consider educating young devotees to be one of the organization’s most important programs. At the same time, in the 1990s, BAPS emerged as a prominent spokesman for the Hindu diaspora and received increased scholarly attention for other programs, like its Cultural Festival of India (CFI) in 1991.<sup>40</sup> The CFI was a month-long extravaganza held in Edison, New Jersey, featuring music and dance performances, cultural exhibits, public speakers and conferences, a food market, shopping displays, and more. The CFI received substantial press coverage and academic attention in the US and became the best-known of all BAPS programs in the US.

Sandhya Shukla’s article “Building Diaspora and Nation” offers a critical reading of the CFI as constructing “diasporic nationalism”: an idealization of Hindu India, an erasure of Muslim

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<sup>39</sup> BAPS Sādhus, “Silver Anniversary,” 7: “vilakṣaṇ pravṛtti [...] Āj sudhīmā āśare 5,00,000 jijñāsuone sanskṛtino sansparś karāvanār.”

<sup>40</sup> See: Sandhya Shukla, “Building Diaspora and Nation: The 1991 ‘Cultural Festival of India,’” *Cultural Studies* 11, no. 2 (1997): 296—315. Prema Kurien, *A Place at the Multicultural Table: The Development of an American Hinduism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007). Raymond Brady Williams, “Representations of Swaminarayan Hinduism,” in *Public Hinduism*, ed. John Zavos *et al* (New Delhi: Sage Publishers, 2012), 176—189.

influence, and use of American multiculturalist discourse to afford Indian Americans a de-racialized white-collar identity.<sup>41</sup> From her time at the event, she was struck by the surprising uniformity of knowledge she found among volunteers at the CFI. Shukla turns to Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* to discuss how far-flung populations are nevertheless made to feel connected, and she holds up the CFI as an event connecting American Indians as an imagined community. To be sure, the event of the CFI was an important historical marker for BAPS and the development of American Hinduism more generally. However, behind the CFI, the work of inculcating new BAPS members through Satsang Exams and teaching them the guru lineage was a community-formative program of equal, if not greater, impact.

Satsang Exam participation spiked in early 1991 as BAPS prepared for the CFI that summer (see Figure 4.4). In the 1970s and 80s, Exam participation increased gradually from year to year. From the two thousand original test-takers in 1972, the Exams surpassed five thousand participants for the first time in 1984 and ten thousand in 1988. In 1991, during the year of preparation for the CFI, the number of total Satsang Exam participants nearly doubled, from 11,845 in 1990 up to 22,246. After 1991, the new cohort of American devotees kept Exam participation above twenty thousand through the early '90s.

The massive increase in Satsang examinees helps explain how BAPS achieved an event on the scale of the CFI, and it also tells us more about their capacity to form an imagined community in the Hindu diaspora. Exam results show that this new influx of members to BAPS also did their homework. The passing rate of examinees held stable through the increase in participation: 64.67% of examinees passed in 1991, which is on par with years past. As the CFI introduced BAPS to many new outsiders, Satsang Exams connected many new insiders to the guru lineage at the core

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<sup>41</sup> Shukla, "Building Diaspora and Nation," 309—312.

of the BAPS community, as participation surged in the 1990s. Again, the Exams not only spread the BAPS interpretation of Svāminārāyaṇ teaching; they were also used to build up the institution.

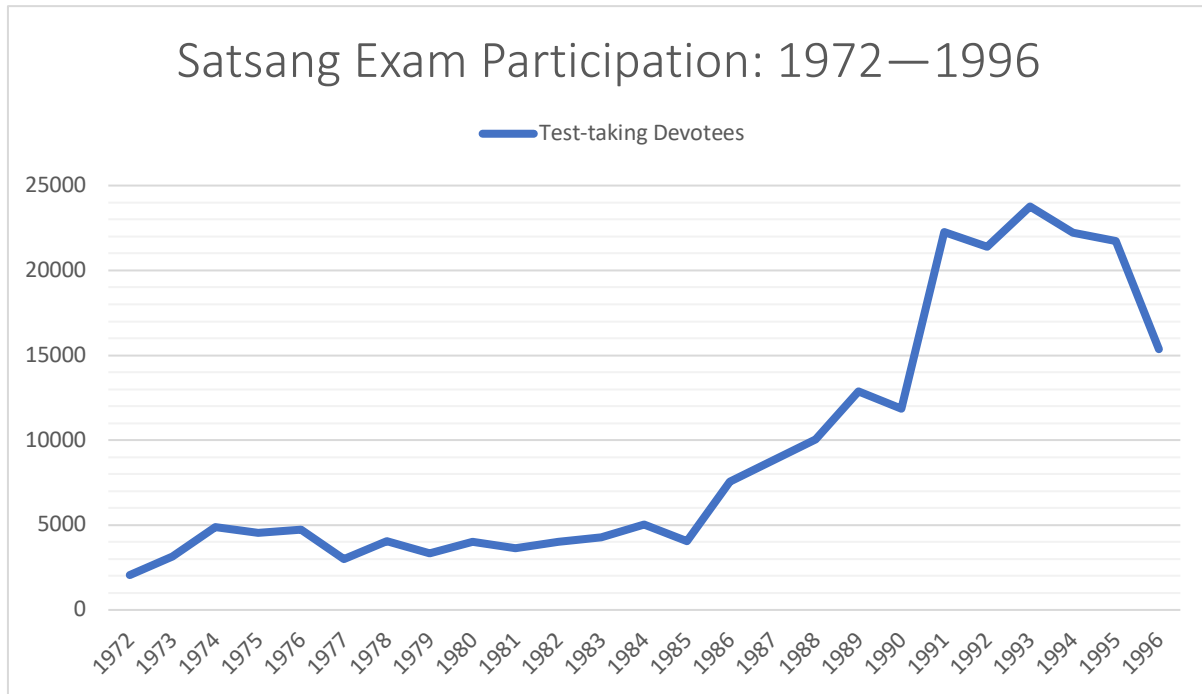
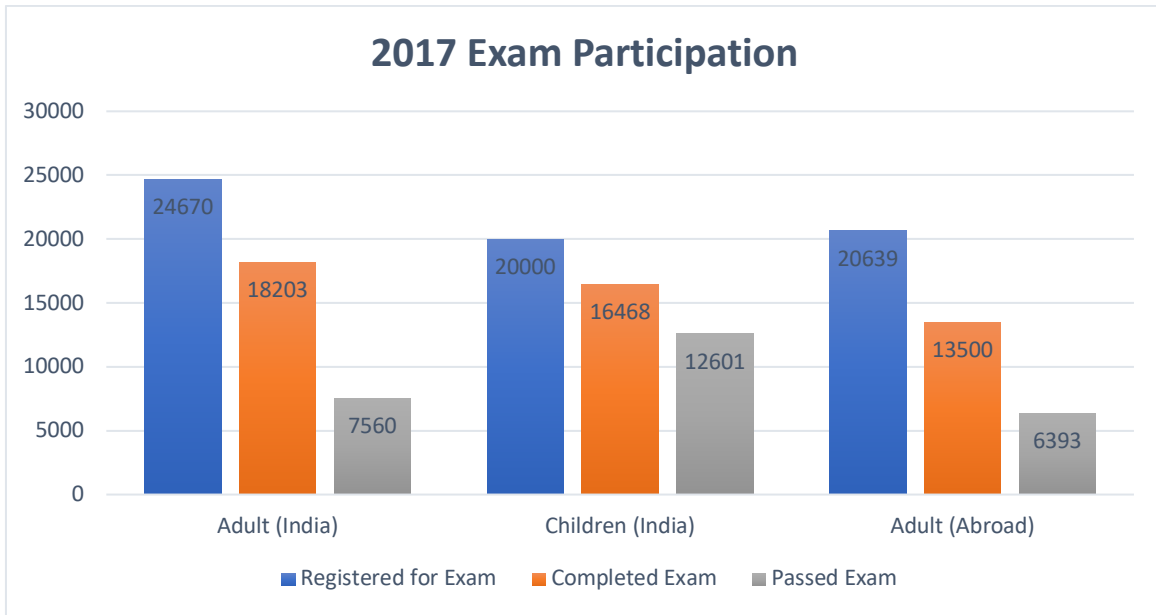


Figure 4.4: Satsang Exam Participation: 1972—1996  
 Source: BAPS Sādhus, “Silver Anniversary,” 9.

The number of devotees submitting Satsang Exams continued to grow in the late-2010s, and devotees in the BAPS diaspora, though fewer numerically, participated at a higher rate than their Indian peers. In 2017, for example, the Exam Department staff in Ahmedabad processed over 48,000 Exams in a single year. In India, BAPS has 515 exam centers, which registered 24,670 adult devotees to sit for Exams in 2017, at an average of forty-eight examinees registered per center. Of those, 18,203 completed their Exams, and 7,560 received passing marks (about 41.5%). The Indian exam centers also had 20,000 children register for the children’s Exams; of those, 16,468 completed the Exams, and 12,601 received passing marks (about 76.5%). Outside of India, BAPS has 172 exam centers, 100 of which are in North America, and the other seventy-two are in the UK, East Africa, Australia, and New Zealand. Figures were unavailable for children’s Exams

outside of India, but 20,639 adult devotees registered for Exams abroad, at an average of 120 examinees registered per center. Of those, 13,500 completed the Exams, and 6,393 received passing marks (about 47.4%). Thus BAPS' adult devotees abroad registered for Satsang Exams at a much higher rate than devotees in India (120 vs. 48 per center). They also scored slightly higher than Indian devotees (47.4% vs. 41.5% passing).



*Figure 4.5: 2017 Satsang Exam Participation*  
*Source: BAPS Exam Minister, personal interview, May 17, 2018.*

These figures cast light on contemporary trends in the popularity of Satsang Exams. The higher participation of adults in the diaspora reflects the fact that Satsang Exams were designed with the diasporic community in mind. As I describe later, American devotees also place more importance on Exam studies as a means of actively becoming Hindu. Passing rates are fairly low among adults, in part because temples encourage maximum participation, and devotees consider any score to be a personal spiritual benefit, regardless of whether or not they pass. Aside from their numeric score, devotees focus on the time and effort dedicated to studying as a sign of satsang commitment, which the all-knowing guru will recognize. Children's passing rates are much higher

in lower-level Exams. Their widespread success in the early rounds encourages larger cohorts of young devotees to continue with their satsaᅅg studies. Over recent decades, BAPS temples have consistently increased their numbers of examinees to the roughly fifty thousand who now participate annually.

Satsang Exam data enables BAPS satsaᅅgi test-takers to see themselves as part of a larger collective, and they inform the guru about trends within his following. BAPS publishers represent the data of competitive testing results back to the test-takers themselves through the *Patrikā* newsletter, *Prakāś* magazine, local sabhās, and the BAPS website. Each participant’s numeric score gives them a precise ranking in relation to the fixed cultural standard of the Exam curriculum. Devotees experience standardized education as an enhanced unity for the transnational BAPS network. Shukla noticed the uniformity of sevak knowledge at the 1991 CFI because many had already received the concise, identical education of the first Exam’s readings. The Exam’s simultaneity connects devotees as a synchronized community of test-takers. It unifies the call of the medium as if the BAPS guru is speaking to all with one voice. Without personally teaching any of these devotees, the guru can assess every individual’s jñān as well as the overall growth and education of his movement. Mass-examination creates a new form of guru omniscience in their annually aggregated data, creating files on every devotee. The guru knows what texts devotees are supposed to read through the fixed curriculum, and he knows what they actually read through their test results. The following sections consider the testimonies of examinees to understand their experience of connecting with the guru through his Exams.

#### *Meritocratic Faith in India*

Satsang Exams give devotees an experience of the guru’s omniscient power as the antaryāmī, who can enter everyone’s mind, know their feelings, and guide their actions. The Exam process lets devotees feel seen, understood, impacted, and formed by the guru’s consciousness. To

understand the perspective of devotees in India and the US, the rest of this chapter draws from interviews with examinees at my two primary field sites with BAPS: Ahmedabad, Gujarat, and the Chicago suburb of Bartlett, Illinois. In Ahmedabad, I follow the story of one BAPS devotee, called Mukesh, who excelled through Satsang Exams, and I explore how his success in the competitive testing system illuminates a student-devotee culture of testing as self-betterment and an understanding of BAPS as an intellectual meritocracy. In Chicago, I discuss the cases of several families in which both parents and children use the Exams to form Hindu identity and reconnect with Hindu tradition.

Ajantha Subramanian's study of meritocracy in mass examination draws a distinction between two understandings of merit, based either on ascription or achievement. That is, the exam's impartiality promises equal opportunity to reward anyone who works hard and *achieves* their score, but at the same time, some exam toppers believe their scores merely reflect their inherited qualities and innate talent, *ascribed* to them by nature.<sup>42</sup> Drawing a similar distinction, the following sections consider examples of several test-takers. Some hope to prove their devotional merit through high achievement, and others see their inherent, ascribed Hindu-ness to be affirmed by the guru's test. Recent immigrants to the US often become more interested in actively becoming Hindu, achieving a Hindu identity that was previously assumed. American BAPS parents also use Satsang Exams as a way for their children to reflect an ascriptive Hindu quality. American parents and children describe finding a sense of security in their inherited Hindu identity through the Exams; they feel affirmed in their Hindu-ness. College-educated devotees are often drawn to the self-improvement and competition of Satsang Exams, which is consonant with their training in school and professional settings. In both India and the United States, standardized

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<sup>42</sup> Subramanian, *Caste of Merit*, 154—157.

testing is a ubiquitous rite of passage for students. Satsang Exams often help devotee students hone their test-taking skills and achieve higher scores. Devotees in India describe the Satsang Exam program as a way to establish credentials and earn opportunities within the prominent BAPS. Towards these various ends, Satsang Exams become the medium for devotees to feel recognized and impacted by the guru's omniscient power.

Mukesh is a bright, young BAPS satsangi in Ahmedabad, whose experience with Satsang Exams is emblematic of how standardized testing becomes a means of merit-based recognition for student devotees. I first met Mukesh in early-2018 for an evening at his family's home in an affluent west-Ahmedabad development. Mukesh was a recent college graduate who had just finished his internship with Goldman Sachs in Bangalore and was looking forward to beginning his graduate studies in information management at Carnegie-Mellon University that Fall. Mukesh's membership in BAPS has always been tied to his studies. Mukesh and I sat in their front room to discuss what he called his "journey with reading" in BAPS. A framed photograph hung on the wall beside us, showing a six-year-old Mukesh on a stage receiving a trophy from Pramukh Swami. The trophy itself sat on a nearby shelf: a golden tree, decorated with pictures of the BAPS gurus on its branches. Mukesh explained that he won a BAPS children's shloka contest (mukhpāth) by memorizing three-hundred fifty Sanskrit shlokas over the course of a year and reciting them all correctly before the BAPS sādhus.

His education within BAPS often mixed textual study with moral discipline. During his preparation for the shloka contest, BAPS teachers asked Mukesh to follow a vow (niyam) to stop watching television. Mukesh and his parents agreed to keep the household TV switched off for an entire year. However, after winning the contest, he maintained the TV niyam for the better part of a decade; "I didn't watch again until ninth grade," he said. Mukesh believes this was a formative

intellectual experience for him. Before the contest, Mukesh says, “I’ll tell you how much I loved TV. I could not miss even a single frame. That is the level of addiction I had.” He said his imagination was closed while watching TV, and his senses were overly attached to it. His studies in BAPS helped him recognize and break that addiction, such that when he returned to watching TV, he was able to do so with detachment (*vairāgya*) and discernment (*vivek*). These are the spiritual benefits Mukesh associates with his experience in BAPS, training the mind and breaking addictions. He said this effect did not come from memorizing shlokas but rather from the years of studying for Satsang Exams that followed. Other devotees have voiced similar experiences of assessing and overcoming their personal faults through the Exams.

Mukesh values the study ethic of intellectual achievement in BAPS, which is full of devotees who are *jigñāsu* (desiring knowledge). Mukesh praised his fellow satsaṅgis, saying, “Everyone is curious. Everyone is *jigñāsu*.” He says the guru and *sādhus* set the example of BAPS as a studying community: “the *sādhus* work constantly” and “new publications come out all the time, so you can never be done [reading], you have to get updated.” Studying for Satsang Exams is thus a never-ending discipline, a life-long pursuit of merit under the omniscient guru. The continuous work at the Swaminarayan Aksharapith shows Mukesh that education is core to BAPS and that devotees constantly need to reassess their knowledge against the latest publications. He saw a recent example of this when Bhadrash Swami, the prominent BAPS Sanskritist, spoke at the Shahibaug temple in early 2018. Mukesh commented on “the amount of people who came to Bhadrash Swami’s talk... It was jam-packed.” I agreed the assembly hall was full that night, standing room only, putting attendance around seven thousand. For Mukesh, the impressive attendance for lectures on a Sanskrit commentary demonstrates the widespread intellectual curiosity of the BAPS community; he commented, “that shows what kind of satsaṅg we have. So

many people actually want to learn things.” For Mukesh, the guru’s divine inspiration motivates devotees to achieve their devotional merit through studies.

The guru’s call to Satsang Exams motivated Mukesh to study the scriptures, which he says was essential for his personal development. Without the Exam requirements and pressure from authority figures, young devotees are particularly unlikely to read the more abstract, theological texts, like the *Vacanāmṛt*. Even Mukesh admitted the text was initially daunting for him as a teenaged reader: “I had the notion that [the *Vacanāmṛt*] is pretty deep stuff, and it is not made for me. I have my whole life to read this, and I am too young for it,” Mukesh said. As a child, he was enamored of the *Mahābhārata*, *Rāmāyaṇa*, and the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book series, captivated by their epic stories and characters. In contrast, the *Vacanāmṛt* is a series of debates on the qualities of true devotion, the spiritual self, the bodily senses, and the nature of God. In addition to its dense subject material, the text lacks the kind of action and driving narrative that might help engage younger readers. Nevertheless, Mukesh appreciates the fact that BAPS pushed him to switch from the narrative-based epics to the discourse-based *Vacanāmṛt*: “the Exams made it compulsory for me, that I had to read them. The Exams gave me the motivation that I have to pass a particular level.” Like many young students, the introduction of scripture as preparation for an examination heightened the stakes of reading. For Mukesh, and thousands of other young BAPS devotees, the challenge of competitive testing was motivation enough to prove his merit by studying the scriptures.

High-stakes testing outside of BAPS is also an occasion for devotees to experience the guru’s antaryāmī power. Students themselves pray for certain questions to appear on tests, and many students in BAPS seek academic guidance from sādhus and the guru. For example, another student devotee in Ahmedabad, Archana, believes she often receives Bhagvān Svāminārāyaṇ’s

support during her tests. When we met in 2018, Archana was a second-year dental school student. She had previously hoped to attend medical school, but her entrance exam scores were not high enough. She sat for the medical school entrance exam three times but still did not receive admission, which was personally devastating. Finally, her father went to Mahant Swami and asked for his guidance on Archana's future. He used his phone to take an audio recording of the guru's reply, saying Archana should take the entrance exam for dental school instead of medical school and "I will pray to God" for her to pass. Archana credits Mahant Swami's prayer for helping her pass the dental school entrance exam that day. During another challenging exam in secondary school, Archana says she had a religious experience when "God helped" write her essays: "I don't know what was happening, my hand was just moving like that [writing motion]. Nothing was coming in my mind." She believes Bhagvān Svāminārāyaṇ was in control of her hand during that exam. It was "just spontaneous, because of Maharaj." She says, "I pray whenever I'm stressed. I prayed about passing, and I got first class." Testing is often a time of heightened anxiety about the future when students turn to religious counselors for support, and Archana felt the guru's antaryāmī power make a direct intercession in her exams. For Archana, the guru's intercession demonstrated that his grace and love for her outweighed the value of her personal achievements or performance on tests.

In contrast, Mukesh sees BAPS as an achievement-based testing satsaṅg, in which Exam performance is the means of assessment, ranking, and credentialling. Satsaṅg Exams gave Mukesh a way to stand out in the transnational crowd of devotees and connect with his guru; "There are millions of satsaṅgis, and you can imagine how hard it is for the guru to connect with each of us." In an organization as large as BAPS, individual recognition from the guru is a rare opportunity. Back in the 1950s, Yogiji already found it difficult to connect with all of his young devotees, and

by the 2010s, most BAPS devotees had little expectation of spending any personal time with their guru. The Exams provided Mukesh with an ideal vehicle to express his devotion to the guru, combining his love of reading with his competitive drive to receive a top score. Mukesh acknowledges he is “competitive in academics” and says he was motivated to take the Exams partly by a desire to be a “topper.” Every year BAPS announces the Satsang Exam toppers, the top five score-winners for each of the seven Exam levels, and BAPS temple services honor toppers, awarding them silver medals (see Figure 4.6). The Exams offer the promise of meritocracy to devotees that anyone can receive a personal honor from the guru, the embodiment of God on Earth, if they work hard enough.



Figure 4.6: Mahant Swami awards a 2018 exam topper with a Silver Medal. Source: “HH Mahant Swami Maharaj’s Vicharan,” BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, Swaminarayan Aksharpath, November 15, 2018, [https://www.baps.org/Vicharan/2018/15-November-2018-14486.aspx?CM\\_id=307029](https://www.baps.org/Vicharan/2018/15-November-2018-14486.aspx?CM_id=307029).

Mukesh was a silver-medalist in his first two years of taking Satsang Exams, even though he started earlier than most BAPS devotees. Devotees typically sit for the first Exam level, *Prārambh*, at the beginning of secondary school, or high school, around age fifteen. Mukesh took the *Prārambh* Exam at age twelve and still became a topper. He took the second Exam at age thirteen and received a top score again. Mukesh submitted Exams every year, completing the final,

seventh Exam, *Prājñā-3*, at age nineteen. Often *Prājñā* test-takers are in their sixties and seventies, pursuing what the Exam website calls a “postgraduate level course” on BAPS,<sup>43</sup> but Mukesh sailed through as a teenager. His success in the Exam competition brought Mukesh a sense of accomplishment and self-betterment that he could measure through his scores and awards, year after year. More than the antaryāmī’s spiritual recognition that reaches everyone, Mukesh valued the individual in-person honor from a guru with precious little time.

Scoring highly on Satsang Exams also vetted Mukesh to become a young leader within BAPS, both locally and nationally. Over a recent summer break, Mukesh was assigned to give PR sevā at the New Delhi Akshardham temple, where he guided tours for VIP guests and foreign tourists. This is an enviable assignment that Mukesh feels lucky to have received; Akshardham New Delhi is BAPS’ most famous temple, a source of pride for devotees, and a major tourist attraction, with over 100,000 visitors per week.<sup>44</sup> Every year Akshardham has more sevā applicants than positions available and a long waiting list. Mukesh believes his Satsang Exam scores were one reason why he was selected for this sevā.

Additionally, at his neighborhood temple, Mukesh leads a weekly sabhā for young devotees by delivering spiritual discourses. The temple’s sādhu gives a theme to Mukesh, and he draws from the *Vacanāmṛt* and other Satsang Exam texts to prepare a twenty-minute speech on that theme. So, in several ways, Mukesh has become a spokesman for BAPS, which would not be possible without the Exams. His success with Exams makes Mukesh confident enough to speak publicly about the BAPS gurus and theology in temple and with outsiders. By the same token, Mukesh’s Exam scores make the BAPS leaders confident enough to put him forward and trust him

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<sup>43</sup> “Satsang Exam Overview,” Satsang Exam e-Registration, BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, accessed November 1, 2019, <https://www.bapssatsangexams.org/Home/SSP>.

<sup>44</sup> Williams, “Representations of Swaminarayan Hinduism,” 176—189.

as their representative. As a transnational organization, the numeric evaluation of the standardized testing helps BAPS rank young volunteers on a common rubric.

Faith in the achievement-based meritocracy of standardized testing undergirds many student devotees' perception of the guru's omniscience. The assumed accuracy of their test scores leads devotees to believe the guru has inspected their minds and judged their merit. Mukesh's experience of rising through the BAPS ranks in India is a perfect example of this; his intense study ethic is recognized, recorded, and rewarded within the organization. As a result, Mukesh believes the guru knows how much he studies and blesses him for it. Mukesh's self-understanding is based in assumptions of meritocracy, and most of his experiences—in school, in BAPS, his internships, and family life—have reinforced his belief. His achievements in various BAPS competitions developed his character, breaking his addiction to TV and deepening his appreciation of scripture. For Mukesh, this development was also mediated by the guru's omniscience, as the *antaryāmī* can both perceive and change one's behavior. His experience as a topper is, by definition, exceptional, and most devotees do not receive the individual praise and validation that Mukesh has. For others like Archana, the stressful experience of competitive testing creates a need for devotees to invite the omniscient guru into their minds for assistance.

### *Testing Hindu Immigrants*

Devotees who immigrate to the US study the same Exam curriculum as their Indian peers, but they describe a different set of personal stakes for Satsang Exams in the diaspora. When I caught up with Mukesh in 2019, he was halfway through his master's program at Carnegie-Mellon and a weekly *sabhā* attendee at the BAPS temple in Pittsburgh. He appreciated the “seamless transition” he experienced between the Ahmedabad and Pittsburgh temples. Because of the consistency in BAPS temple programming, Mukesh said he was “surprised how easy” his time in the US had been. He was immediately plugged into a community and a discourse in which he had

fluency and credentials. In this sense of communal belonging and affirmation, he already appreciated some of the value many immigrant Hindu families find in Satsang Exams. Devotees outside of India often submit Exams to confirm an assumed Hindu identity for themselves and their families. These final two sections consider two experiences that bring many American devotees to Satsang Exams: 1) immigration and the transition to a new life, and 2) raising Hindu children in the diaspora. The distinction between achievement- and ascription-based merit is also relevant in the American diaspora, albeit reoriented around the merit of Hindu identity. In the US, some test-takers seek to improve themselves by actively becoming Hindu, while others look to the Exams for assurance of their natural Hindu heritage.

A baseline recognition among American BAPS members is that Satsang Exams teach them to speak confidently about their Hindu background. One immigrant devotee in Chicago, who came to the US with his family as an eleven-year-old, reflected this as an ascriptive understanding of Exams reflecting his Hindu heritage. At eleven, he spoke only Gujarati, no English, and experienced more than his fair share of bullying in Chicago Public Schools. When we spoke in 2018, he was in his mid-30s, and his accent was impeccably Chicagoan, sounding more Polish-American than Gujarati. He called his family “generalist Hindus” in India, not Svāminārāyaṇ or involved with any particular temple. However, in the US, his parents were drawn to BAPS, he said, because they thought: “I need to know the value of my heritage, my religious beliefs.” Even though his family was not affiliated with the Svāminārāyaṇ movement historically, the education he received from BAPS came to represent his heritage in the United States. The perceived objectivity of Satsang Exams obscures the sectarian particularity of BAPS’ teaching and enables them to stand in for Hinduism as a whole. He says, now he only discusses the Exam material when non-Hindu, white colleagues ask him questions about Hindu holidays or traditions. In this way,

his education through Satsang Exams reinforced the Hindu identity ascribed to him by his parents and colleagues.

Devotees often begin the Exams to reinforce their assumed Hindu identity but eventually feel pushed to achieve new devotional qualities. Some adult American devotees described transformative personal experiences and heightened spiritual senses after taking the Exams. Such was the case with one couple who moved from Ahmedabad to Chicago, where the husband studied engineering and rose to work as a senior manager in software development. He and his wife began taking Exams together in Chicago to learn more about Hindu traditions, as she said, “That’s what Satsang Exams are all about. I learned all the reasons about our traditions, why we do this and that.” He said the BAPS gurus taught them: “Know your roots. Stick to your roots.” They both expressed being drawn to Satsang Exams by their traditional appeal, which affirmed their Hindu roots. The Exam process also helped them through the difficult period of starting over in a new country, when the pressures of life in America wore on their personal and professional happiness.

The difficulties of life after immigration pushed these devotees to seek out active changes in their lives. The Exam readings became an ethical discipline for this husband, for example, making him more aware of how bodily impulses (*svabhāvs*), such as anger, affected his actions. As this Chicago devotee memorized stories from the gurus’ hagiographies, he also fostered a mimetic relationship with their divine lives. He began striving to live up to their model of introspection and equanimity. He said the Exam reading began to impact “every decision I made” in life, “Exams help me act better, in meetings, or if a crisis comes up,” he learned to control his senses and subdue his anger. He found this to be a unique benefit of Satsang Exams, unlike all other education in his life: “it’s not something you learn from anywhere else.” As an engineering student, the testing process was familiar to him, but he was surprised by the effect of internalizing

the guru's examples. This was a new experience for him. The guru's presence in his mind prompted an ethical self-assessment of his every micro-decision. He felt so transformed by Satsang Exams that he credited them with "my character, everything I am today." He believed that the guru reached out to him through the Exams and changed his habits for the better. Passing the Exams was his achievement, which the guru rewarded by refining his ethical Hindu character.

Another Chicago devotee emphasized that he drew a sense of achievement through the formal assessment of Satsang Exams. He said, "without Exams, I don't think I would have learned the concepts because there is no measurement. Satsang Exam, that is the measurement." Like Mukesh, the competitive scoring pushed this devotee to take the studies seriously. The Chicago devotee wanted an external evaluation of his jñān to track his progress in becoming Hindu and living a life centered on guru-bhakti. He was proud of how he measured up. After passing his Satsang Exams, he said, "I knew satsaṅg. I knew that confidence." It was his Satsang Exam credentials that made him a true satsaṅgi, instead of a personal connection with the guru, a BAPS sādhu, or other householding devotees. Completing the Exam process distinguished him from BAPS outsiders and other Hindus who are less engaged in learning about their traditions. This is the same distinction drawn by Mukesh: what sets BAPS apart is its active commitment to improve themselves as Hindus constantly. By documenting and numericizing devotee achievement in Satsang Exams, BAPS allows devotees to prove to themselves and their peers their level of progress in the satsaṅg.

Recent American immigrants often say that their Hindu life in India was passive and undeveloped, and they became more engaged as Hindus in the US. The Chicago devotee mentioned in the above paragraph echoed this sentiment, saying the Exams gave him a "deeper understanding" of his devotional practices, making his experiences in temple worship more

profound. He considered his faith shallow and immature before participating in the Exams. Without knowledge of the guru lineage, visiting temple to take darśan and bow was a hollow ceremony. He said that darśan now gives him the “deeper connection with God” that he always wanted. When he takes darśan of the guru’s mūr̥ti, he recalls hundreds of the guru’s divine qualities and stories he memorized over the past seven years. He has dozens of reasons, top of mind, that reaffirm his belief in the BAPS guru as the one true vessel of God on Earth. The Exams made him an active participant in his relationship with the guru, who recognizes and rewards his accomplishments by connecting with him during darśan.

### *Inheriting Hinduism in the United States*

American parents look to Satsang Exams as means of affirming an ascribed Hindu identity for their children. Without the support of grandparents and extended family networks, some parents describe being overwhelmed by children with endless questions: “Kids they have so many questions,” one mother said, “They will ask you everything... [my daughter] was like, ‘What do you do in the morning?’ When we are doing pūjā, and we are like, ‘This is the way we remember God and thank them.’” Of course, the questions keep coming, and whenever personal knowledge is exhausted, the Satsang Exam books become a dependable resource: “that’s when we take them back to the books, and we say, see, this is what we read and this is exactly why we’re doing it.” The Exam books help families explain their way of life to their younger generation and teach American-born children about their inherited Hinduism. While many recent immigrants chose to take Exams for a sense of achievement, the second generation is given Exams to ascribe their Hindu inheritance.

Some devotee parents place their children in Satsang Exams, not to become Hindu, but because they already are. For these parents, the Exam process is less of a one-time personal achievement and more of a generational cycle of reaffirming Hindu identity in the family. One

devotee father in Chicago had already completed the Exams, felt more confident in his Hindu identity as a result, and expected his daughters to take the Exams as well. This father compared the effects of education in school and temple: “In school, they learn the history of America. Why do they learn that? So they can feel, yeah I am American. This is my country. Same way with Satsang Exams, they can get that feeling that, yeah, I am Hindu, this is my way of life.” American public schooling creates the American nation’s imagined community, and Satsang Exams foster a similar connectivity within the imagined transnational community of the BAPS satsaṅg. This father wanted his children to take Satsang Exams to realize the Hindu identity he already ascribed to them.

This father intended to use the Exams as a parenting tool and planned to re-take all seven Exams along with his daughter. He was excited to read the Exam books with her. He saw it as an opportunity to bond with his daughter and make Hinduism a family activity. They would pass through the affective testing process together: the struggle of memorizing all the reading material, the anticipation of Exam prep, the focus on Exam day, and the excitement of passing and receiving their scores together. This father was not pursuing BAPS credentials or status in the satsaṅg. He wanted to teach his daughter to embrace her Hindu identity and pass it down for generations. The work of studying thus becomes deeply entwined with Hindu tradition in American families like this one. American children look to older generations as the standard-bearers of Hinduism, and parents find that studying for Satsang Exams creates lasting memories that will carry Hindu identity through another generation.

Other Chicago parents also study and re-take Satsang Exams with their children, blending the affirmation of Hindu identity with the practical skills of standardized testing. One BAPS parent in Chicago told me that he was happy to see his son’s SAT preparation improve because of Satsang

Exams. He mentioned that many of the Exam questions test reading for comprehension, just like the SATs, so after Satsang Exams, his son can read a short story and explain its main points more quickly. These benefits from Satsang Exams come in addition to other BAPS temple programs directly geared toward improved performance in school: SAT prep classes, application workshops, mock interviews, and tutoring sessions.<sup>45</sup> Satsang Exams spiritualize standardized testing skills because the guru has promised a successful test-taker will gain spiritual liberation in Akṣardhām, as one young, American BAPS devotee reiterated to me. She said, “I think of it as our AP exams” and she analogized the spiritual telos of Satsang Exams with academic success, saying:

Our guru has said that the benefits of Satsang Exams are equivalent to attaining Akṣardhām, which is my final goal, so I took his words very personally. If I’m working very hard in school to get the A, we’ll do anything because the A is our goal. And on the spiritual path, going to Akṣardhām is my goal, so if [the Satsang Exam] is a step toward going to Akṣardhām, then why would I not do it?

This student intuitively translated the logic of standardized testing from good grades to spiritual liberation, similar to what Waghorne found in other guru education programs. Satsang Exams prompt some young BAPS devotees to internalize their spiritual experiences in the same terms as their goal-oriented study ethic from school. In this case, passing Satsang Exams is also understood as a personal, achievement-based merit that the guru rewards with spiritual liberation.

These combinations of spiritual and academic motivations are similar to Mukesh and others’ experience of competitive testing in India, but one distinction in the American context is the elevated importance of temples in diasporic Hindu communities. Young American devotees depend more on the temple as an authoritative source for more dimensions of Hindu life, including language, music, food, and dress. For teenaged American devotees, everything that happens at

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<sup>45</sup> Prema Kurien had similar findings in her study of the Los Angeles-area BAPS temple, which conducted regular tutoring sessions for SAT prep. Kurien, *Multicultural Table*, 107.

temple becomes emblematic of Hinduism. Inversely, all of American life occurring outside the temple—at school and work—is perceived to be decidedly non-Hindu. For example, one teenaged devotee in Chicago struggled with both BAPS Satsang Exams and her public-school World History test on Hinduism, but she described the two experiences quite differently. When she described failing her most recent Satsang Exam, she was upset with herself and pointed to her shortcoming, insufficient preparation, as the reason behind the failure: “if you dedicate enough time to prep, you’ll pass. It’s all about how much time you can put into it.” She believed the guru was a fair arbiter of *jñān*, who accurately perceived she did not study enough, and her Exam score reflected her level of time and effort.

By contrast, a high school World History class that taught Hinduism left this devotee skeptical of her class test and textbook. She described the textbook’s coverage of Hinduism as simplistic and delimited: “It was like, *Brahmā* is God. The End.” To be sure, her experience is consistent with American public education’s long history of orientalist and caricatured representation of Hinduism.<sup>46</sup> She was also frustrated by unclear test questions, saying, “I’m sitting there getting the questions about Hinduism wrong on my test, and I’m like, I’m a Hindu, how am I getting this wrong?” She doubted the test’s ability to assess her knowledge of Hinduism, citing her inherited Hindu identity. More than their Indian peers, American BAPS devotees feel schooling outside of BAPS cannot improve their pre-existing knowledge of Hinduism. This devotee’s comments reflect an ascriptive assumption that she should pass tests on Hinduism because she is Hindu.

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<sup>46</sup> See Michael J. Altman, *Heathens, Hindoo, Hindu: American Representations of India, 1721–1893* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2017): 48–73.

The vernacular duality of “Hindu life” and “American life” can paper over the ways American legal and ideological definitions of “religion” influence all religious communities, including BAPS, to recenter themselves around Protestant Christian values of faith and personal belief. We can compare BAPS’ Hindu education with immigrant religious communities throughout American history, for example, catechism for American Catholic children and Reformed Jewish Hebrew schools. Second-generation American test-takers discuss Satsang Exams and becoming Hindu in terms of intellectually deciding their “ideology” and “beliefs.” One such devotee in Chicago, called Jiya, was a recent college graduate about to begin a master’s program at Northwestern. She said Satsang Exams gave her “a great wealth of information. It’s my ancestry.” She wanted to learn more about her ancestry to adopt her inherited beliefs consciously; “there’s a difference between being born in satsaṅg, and actually feeling like I came into satsaṅg, and accepting it as, yeah, this is what I value. Every time I read, a little more of me becomes satsaṅgi, a little bit more of me is like, yes, this is what I ideologically believe in.” For Jiya, becoming Hindu was a process of learning and assenting to a received ideological system. As she continued into the advanced Exams, she aligned herself with the beliefs that had already been ascribed by her ancestry, as mediated through the BAPS guru.

At the same time, explaining her inherited Hindu beliefs to others gave Jiya a sense of achievement. When we spoke, I asked if she ever felt annoyed or burdened by classmates and teachers’ questions to explain Hinduism, or for example, the red cāṅdlo mark on her forehead. She said no, to the contrary, she appreciated it: “When people ask me about my cāṅdlo, that gives me a platform. My friends who are American Christians, they don’t get that opportunity, so I don’t think of it as a burden.” Jiya was especially talented at using this platform. As a high-school student, she won a scholarship from the Coca-Cola Scholars Foundation, covering all her college

expenses. The Coca-Cola scholarship is a nationwide competition of 105,000 high-schoolers, with just 150 winners. As with her Satsang Exams, she was also a topper at Coca-Cola. After multiple rounds of interviews, Jiya was selected as a finalist. When she entered in the final interview room, the committee's first question was about her cāndlo. She recalled, "I was ready to talk about academics, my work, but they just wanted to talk about the red dot on my head." Again, she enjoyed answering the question: "it was such an intriguing conversation, it was *beautiful*. It was beautiful because people of different cultures were finally coming together and talking about ... where they could connect." Affirming the committee's assumption of her Hindu background aided in Jiya's achievement of winning the scholarship. She felt confident explaining a Hindu cultural perspective because Satsang Exams already confirmed the Hindu ancestry she received at birth.

American Hindu youth perceive the guru's omniscience in both their achievement-based and ascription-based understandings of Satsang Exams. The guru's promise of objective scoring and spiritual rewards prompt some young satsaṅgis to internalize their devotional development as a goal-oriented study ethic, like "working very hard to get the A" in class. Whether they pass or fail, devotees believe the guru's antaryāmī power continuously observes their study habits and rewards their efforts with impartiality. At the same time, some devotees see passing Satsang Exams as a reflection of their Hindu heritage. Parents hope the Exams will help their children realize their pre-existing relationship with the BAPS guru and affirm their innate Hindu-ness. American children, in particular, perceive the guru as knowing and representing all of Hindu traditions. He knows their "heritage," their "roots," their "ancestry," and students need only participate in Satsang Exams to uncover these inherited beliefs within themselves. Thus, both as an impartial judge of achievement and confirmation of their ascription, the omniscient guru connects with American youth through his Exams.

*Conclusion: Guru Omniscience in a Testing Satsaᅅg*

Mass examinations give the BAPS guru the power of omniscience in his satsaᅅg. As the ultimate examiner of his devotees, the BAPS guru sits in the authoritative position to know everything about their satsaᅅgi development. In 1972, Pramukh Swami announced that Exams would provide devotees with “systematic, sustained and pure knowledge.” However, they also provide the guru with a steady stream of information on what those devotees understand and believe. Using Satsaᅅg Exams as a medium for membership reshapes the guru’s following into a testing satsaᅅg, a school of students who must submit to his assessment for entry. At the apex of the testing bureaucracy, the guru’s institutional leadership translates into enhanced spiritual power. His potential access to any examinee’s results creates a panoptic power dynamic in which the guru is perceived to know every devotee’s mind. In this way, his expansive agency works through the Satsaᅅg Exam system to manifest the guru’s antaryāmi power over every test-taker during their test preparation, performance, review, and rewards.

Hindu standardized testing also primes devotees to experience the guru’s omniscience as akin to the stressful scrutiny of any high-stakes, competitive exam. Devotees in Chicago and Ahmedabad may take Satsaᅅg Exams for different reasons, but they place themselves in a standardized relation to the all-knowing guru. Some see the Exams as a connection to their ancestry, while others see them as a ladder to new opportunities in a modern organization. Some use the tests as an opportunity for family bonding, and others use them to achieve higher ranking in competition with their peers. Some immigrants take the Exams to achieve a new level of religious experience, while some diasporic youth are given the Exams to confirm a Hindu identity they were already ascribed. The genius of Satsaᅅg Exams is their ability to encompass these various endeavors and render them legible for the institution of BAPS. The “objective” scoring

convinces devotees with different motivations that the guru accurately perceives and impartially judges their performance, either due to their hard work or their innate quality as Hindus.

Satsang Exams have built the transnational institution of BAPS by training thousands of devotees each year through a system perceived as neutral. The uniformity of instructions helped BAPS overcome a fractious period in the late-1960s and prevent further division during their transnational expansion. The rule-bound, numeric assessment of the Exam Department provides the organization with an invaluable uniform data set on massive cohorts of followers. The disciplined reading also consolidates training for the dependable volunteer labor that conducts weekly BAPS sabhās at neighborhood temples, operates their national centers like Akshardham New Delhi, and coordinates mass events like the Cultural Festival of India. The Exam readings propagate the teaching of God's constant presence in the BAPS guru lineage, erase other Svāminārāyaṇ organizations, and encourage devotees to read divine influence into BAPS' contemporary news. By rewriting Svāminārāyaṇ history, Satsang Exams have trained devotees to perceive BAPS as the natural inheritors of Svāminārāyaṇ's mission. Their standardization and purported impartiality obscure this sectarian, institution-building mission of the Exams.

The Satsang Exam bureaucracy also illustrates the importance of the BAPS media workers behind the scenes, making sure the entire testing system runs smoothly. The next chapter explores the work of one such BAPS tech team, the Multimedia Cell (MMC), which digitized the Satsang Exam registration system, among their dozens of other projects in new media technologies. Like the thousands of Satsang examinees, the devotees in the MMC are never done learning. Their mission is an open-ended exploration of new technologies that may benefit the guru, which requires MMC workers to keep abreast of tech industry trends. Their constant experimentation generates the new BAPS technologies and systems that become futures arms of the guru's

expansive agency. Their work casts light on life and sevā inside the BAPS media institution, which can be both spiritually rewarding and physically exhausting.

Sevā in Satsang Exams and the MMC mediates different spiritual virtues of the guru for BAPS. While Satsang Exams promote the mass cultivation of jñān of the guru and BAPS' sectarian lineage, the work of the MMC mediates a properly detached (vairāgya) affective relationship to technology. Their sevā reimagines the production and consumption of media technologies to foster a mimetic relationship with the renunciant guru and a cessation from this-worldly pleasures. MMC workers maintain vairāgya by submitting themselves to the authority of the guru, who renders divine judgment in real time and assigns theological value to their technological projects. The guru's executive power habituates MMC workers to exercise restraint from their new tech powers, as he may cancel or redirect a project at any time. Moreover, all of their media projects ultimately promote the mass perception of the guru's own vairāgya, as they show him to live an austere, ascetic life, utterly removed from their technological world. His contradictory removal from and control over new media technology renders another spiritual power for the guru: a divine foresight that allows him to predict the future value and vice of a tumultuous tech industry.

Chapter Five: Ascetic Tech Shop:  
The BAPS Multimedia Cell, Experimental Sevā, and the Guru's Divine Foresight

*Introduction: Vikram's Sevā-vocation*

When Vikram graduated from engineering school in 1990, he knew what he wanted to do with his life: to serve his guru, Pramukh Swami Maharaj, with his engineering and computing skills. Vikram was a talented young engineer from Ahmedabad. He attended engineering school on a full state scholarship and interned with the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO). As a student, Vikram created BAPS' first digital database for registration and score-tallying at their 1989 Youth Festival, which drew 25,000 participants. BAPS conducted large-scale events like this before, but Vikram's programming sevā made 1989 their first "computerized" event and substantially reduced costs for the event with a team of just four workers: Vikram, another volunteer for data entry, and two sādhus overseeing them. When BAPS conducted youth competitions before 1989, they tallied all scores on paper, but with 25,000 participants, it could take two days to finalize the results. 25,000 people would have to wait for an awards ceremony, and BAPS would have to plan two days of additional programming, accommodations, and meals. Vikram's computerized database streamlined BAPS' management of this massive event, and the 1989 Youth Festival concluded earlier as a result. With the success of his first computer sevā, Vikram believed his programming skills would be valuable for BAPS in the future. He felt called by God and guru to dedicate himself fully to this vocation.

Vikram also knew that Pramukh Swami required the consent of one's parents before allowing devotees to take initiation as sādhus, so he approached his parents to ask for their permission. He was not asking to become a sādhu, but the vocational life he envisioned required similar considerations for a potentially life-long commitment. His parents respected Vikram's choice to work for BAPS and gave him their blessing. They also agreed to support him financially

so he could serve the organization without any cost to the guru. With their backing, Vikram approached Pramukh Swami and offered his full-time computer sevā, entirely free of charge, but his guru said “no.” Vikram was shocked and confused. Pramukh Swami explained that, since the Indian government had supported him through engineering school, he should “serve the nation” to repay his debt. Vikram was disappointed but not bereft; he turned to Plan B and began working at ISRO in 1990 as a rocket engineer. In the context of guru bhakti, a life of sevā can become complicated, as the guru renders divine judgment in real-time, and devotees do not always receive the answers they expect. Vikram struggled to understand this rejection, but he never questioned Pramukh Swami’s judgment. He trusted the guru had a plan for whatever work lay ahead.

This chapter argues that power dynamics between the BAPS guru and his tech workers generate a belief in his ability to predict the future, and this divine foresight enables their experimental relation to technology. The chapter is an ethnographic study of the lives and labor of BAPS tech workers: programmers, coders, engineers, and graphic designers who work at Swaminarayan Aksharpith on the grounds of the BAPS Shahibaug temple complex in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. These workers are divided into two groups: 1) volunteers who vow to work full-time for the guru with the financial support of their families, and 2) employees who are contracted and financially compensated for their labor by BAPS. Both volunteers and employees consider their tech work as sevā. One group of workers, called the Multimedia Cell (or MMC), is an eleven-man team of both volunteers and employees, now led by Vikram, whom the guru charges to explore and implement the latest technology for BAPS. As their ultimate executive, the BAPS guru decides what media projects his staff will develop or curtail. He also serves as the chief promoter for all

BAPS publications; he blesses every book, CD, DVD, website, and smartphone application upon its release. He encourages BAPS devotees to read, listen, and use them in his spiritual discourses.<sup>1</sup>

The experiences of BAPS' tech workers mirror those of Indian information technology (IT) workers in the wider industry. In the context of an unpredictable tech industry, IT workers face constant job insecurity and often rely on conservative gender norms in their personal lives. Counter to assumptions of a tech-savvy global elite, ethnographic studies of Indian IT workers highlight their precarious position in a particularly volatile industry. As anthropologist Xiang Biao notes, projected labor demands can fluctuate by 100,000s within months, endlessly complicating the international work of IT professional consultancies, or "Body Shops."<sup>2</sup> Loose regulations in the IT industry enable these body-shop consultancies to reassign their workers (or "bodies"), frequently forcing them to move among multiple countries—Australia, the US, Malaysia, China—in a short period of time.<sup>3</sup> As Sareeta Amrute explores, the IT industry's short-term labor contracts and

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<sup>1</sup> BAPS' use of technology has received substantial scholarly critique, often focused on their Akshardham temple complex in New Delhi. See for example, Sanjay Srivastava, "Urban Spaces, Disney-Divinity and Moral Middle Class in Delhi," *Economic and Political Weekly* 27 (June 2009): 338—345; Kavita Singh, "Temple of Eternal Return: The Svāminārāyan Akshardhām Complex in Delhi," *Artibus Asiae* 70, no. 1 (2010): 47—76; Christiane Brosius, "The Perfect World of BAPS," in *Public Hinduisms*, ed. John Zavos *et al* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2012), 440—462; Christiane Brosius, "The Cultural Politics of Transnational Heritage Rituals," in *Ritual, Heritage and Identity: The Politics of Culture and Performance in a Globalised World*, ed. Christiane Brosius and Karin M. Polit (London: Routledge Press, 2011), 97—125. Brosius and Srivastava argue that BAPS and Akshardham's media shows foster a morality of disposable income and leisurely consumption that contributes to the formation a moral middle-class. Srivastava also notes that Pramukh Swami decided to incorporate more technology in order to "keep with the times" and recruit more sādhus (372—373). These critiques tend to focus on the BAPS media products as the site of analysis and argue the media empower the guru with unprecedented levels of social control. There remains a substantial gap in understanding between these critiques and other scholars who focus on the official theological explanations for mediation and the personal spiritual motivations of BAPS devotees as their sources of evidence. For example: Hanna Kim, "Thinking through Akshardham and the Making of the Swaminarayan Self," in *Swaminarayan Hinduism: Tradition, Adaptation, Identity*, ed. Raymond B. Williams and Yogi Trivedi (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016), 383—401; Hanna Kim, "Svāminārāyaṇa: Bhaktiyoga and the Akṣarbrahman Guru," in *Gurus of Modern Yoga*, ed. Mark Singleton and Ellen Goldberg, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 237—260; Kalpesh Bhatt, "Construction of the BAPS Swaminarayan temple in Chino Hills, California: A Case Study in Interfaith Bridge-Building," in *Swaminarayan Hinduism: Tradition, Adaptation, Identity*, ed. Raymond B. Williams and Yogi Trivedi (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016), 364—382.

<sup>2</sup> Xiang Biao, *Global "Body Shopping": An Indian Labor System in the Information Technology Industry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 4—6.

<sup>3</sup> Biao, "Body Shopping," 7.

unknowability of future technology places IT workers, and especially migrant IT workers, in a position of fraught insecurity.<sup>4</sup> The hyper-mobility of the male-dominated IT industry often reinforces conservative gender expectations on Indian women; for example, inflating dowry payments in Andhra Pradesh,<sup>5</sup> and pushing many female Indian workers out of their Silicon Valley jobs to maintain an “appropriately Indian” family life in the diaspora.<sup>6</sup> In addition to the insecurity of most IT work, the mingling of job expectations with religious motivations further complicates the situation inside BAPS. All BAPS tech employees are men, and many are devotees who join the Aksharpath staff out of a spiritual, idealistic drive to serve their guru. Their devotional, sometimes ascetic, disposition inclines BAPS employees to accept lower levels of pay and more demanding, fluctuating job responsibilities.

Workers in the Multimedia Cell demonstrate a form of experimental Hinduism that shows how BAPS explores the latest media technologies and maintains a strict ascetic ethic of *vairāgya* (detachment). The MMC is an important counterexample to similar studies that suggest and “innovative gurus” and “experimental Hinduism” lead to universalized spirituality, theological fluidity, and away from ethnic and sectarian particularities.<sup>7</sup> BAPS tech workers innovate with

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<sup>4</sup> Sareeta Amrute, *Encoding Race, Encoding Class: Indian IT Workers in Berlin* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Biao, “*Body Shopping*,” 25.

<sup>6</sup> Smitha Radhakrishnan, *Appropriately Indian: Gender and Culture in a New Transnational Class* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 147. Also, Amy Bhatt, *High-Tech Housewives: Indian IT Workers, Gendered Labor, and Transmigration* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Amanda Lucia’s summarizes this trend among “hyper gurus” and considers it the epicenter of both technological and theological innovation in the Hindu world; Amanda Lucia, “Innovative Gurus: Tradition and Change in Contemporary Hinduism,” *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, 18, no. 2 (August 2014): 221. As their movements become transnational, Hindu hyper gurus universalize their message and de-ethnicize their teaching, such that it can be appropriated in the greatest number of contexts by seekers who may or may not identify as Hindu. Lola Williamson goes further to argue their universalizing tendency moves these organizations outside the realm of Hinduism proper, and into “Hindu-Inspired Meditations Movements” or HIMMs; Lola Williamson, *Transcendent in America: Hindu-Inspired Meditation Movements as New Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2010). Hugh Urban gives a similar analysis in studies of gurus like Bhagwan Rajneesh, or Osho, Sathya Sai Baba, and Amma: Hugh Urban, *Zorba the Buddha: Sex, Spirituality, and Capitalism in the Global Osho Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016); Smriti Srinivas, *In the Presence of Sai Baba: Body, City, and Memory in a Global Religious Movement* (Boston: Brill, 2008); Tulasi Srinivas, *Winged Faith: Rethinking Globalization and*

new websites and smartphone apps as a form of theological experimentation; they pursue the gurunā rājīpo through their work in techno-science, but they never quite know which tech product will please the guru. These workers see God, not so much in the technology they use—as with DeNapoli’s informants<sup>8</sup>—but in the executive offices above them, in the divine judgment that decides which technology to use and explains its importance. These workers’ faith in the guru is enhanced by his role as a tech executive, although not necessarily because he is technologically experimental—as for DeNapoli and Srinivas<sup>9</sup>—or innovative—as for Lucia and Williamson. Rather, these devotee tech workers gain faith in the guru’s divine foresight when he restrains them from the temptations of new technologies. The guru’s executive authority remakes their experimentation with digital media into a discipline of vairāgya, cultivating an ascetic dispassion for the technologies they explore. By exploring the lives of these BAPS tech workers, this chapter recasts experimental Hinduism as rooted in anxieties about affective attachments to new media and the insatiable need for theologization of future technological power.

The first section of this chapter analyzes the BAPS guru’s constitutional and spiritual authority concerning its prolific media production. The chapter then surveys Vikram and the

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*Religious Pluralism through the Satya Sai Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Maya Warrior, *Hindu Selves in a Modern World: Guru Faith in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2005); and Amanda Lucia, *Reflections of Amma: Devotees in a Global Embrace* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Antionette DeNapoli also argues that sādhus theologize technology as they think experimentally and create new ethical decisions to uphold their traditional values of detachment in the flurry of new products. One Advaita Vedantin sādhu explained his understanding that Paramātmā is in all existence, including her tape recorder. He said, “Gurus come in many forms,” adding “Technology is a guru,” pointing at the recorder. Antionette DeNapoli, “‘Dharm is technology’: the theologizing of technology in the experimental Hinduism of renunciators in contemporary North India,” *International Journal of Dharma Studies* 5, no. 1 (December 2017): 19.

<sup>9</sup> Tulasi Srinivas argues that in the neoliberal age, priests adapt the prescriptions of scriptural dharma through the messy, everyday practice of acara. She says of one priest informant: “He distinguished the liturgical texts as dharmic, as prescriptive, to be learned by rote, but what he did liturgically, as achara, as descriptive, and as a space for creativity ... [and] This distinction allowed [him] permission to improvise hacks in the everyday to deal with continuous and life-altering changes—an aesthetic poetics of an “experimental Hinduism” (DeNapoli 2017), an ethos and ethics of religious experimentation.” Tulasi Srinivas, *The Cow in the Elevator: An Anthropology of Wonder* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 30.

MMC's major projects from 1992 to 2005—an *Akshardham CD-ROM*, multiple BAPS websites, and the *Mystic India* IMAX film—which all support perceptions of the guru's ability to predict the future. The chapter then pivots toward the IT employees of BAPS, including another team in the "Desktop Publications" (or DTP) office, to contrast their combination of *sevā* and career with the volunteers' form of *sevā* as a vocation. With the story of Anand, one employee who left the MMC, we see how BAPS' *sevā* and labor standards can be unsustainably demanding for some. The chapter concludes by considering the MMC's most recent work and its constant effort to keep BAPS apace of the latest tech updates. Understanding Vikram's ascetic self-restraint and his need for the guru's guidance helps explain the relation between BAPS' form of experimental Hinduism and the guru's divine foresight.

#### *The Guru's Tech Authority*

The particular spiritual authority of gurus within the Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāy positions them as the executive of their devotional organizations and makes them especially well-suited to lead a tech media institution. The theology of guru-led Svāminārāyaṇ organizations like BAPS maintains the divinity of Bhagvān Svāminārāyaṇ did not leave Earth with Sahajānand Svāmī's death in 1831. Rather, it remains constantly present on Earth in the human form of the guru. One consequence of God's continued presence in the guru is that divine revelation continues to unfold daily in his institutional leadership. Devotees consider the guru's every speech, consultation, and decision to be divinely inspired. This belief is operative among BAPS' devotee-employees as well. The guru's divine leadership gives workers heightened confidence in his foresight and management decisions. For every project they undertake, BAPS tech workers receive guidance from their boss and a spiritual resolution that the medium is appropriate to use in the eyes of God.

BAPS' governing documents further articulate the guru's executive authority to manage the institution's property and employees.<sup>10</sup> BAPS' charitable trust constitution was certified by the public Trusts Registration Office, Baroda, on the November 20, 1954. The constitution's language was established at a BAPS membership assembly on July 14, 1946, and formally drafted that December. Thus the 1954 language refers to BAPS' first guru, Shastriji Maharaj (d. 1951), in the present tense. However, this codification of the BAPS guru's responsibilities created a formal, indefinite office of the guru as president that transcends any one human lifetime. The trust's constitution appoints an administrative committee with 26 members to manage its properties; "The founder of this institution [the present form of God, the true guru,] Shastriji Maharaj is the President of this committee."<sup>11</sup> The constitution then articulates the president's powers in seven points, the first of which is: "To appoint employees-paid or unpaid and to transfer them if necessary at different places for the management of the properties of the institution."<sup>12</sup> BAPS' renunciant vows prohibit sādhus from managing money or other financial affairs, like payroll, but the guru is able to do so because he is understood as ontologically distinct from all humans. As "the present form of God" (pragaṭ brahmasvarūpa), the sādhu formerly known as Yajnapurshdas (now Shastriji Maharaj) also became an employer and executive when he became the BAPS guru.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Curiously, the 1954 BAPS constitution instructs the guru to appoint a new Ācārya from the original family line, saying, "The President of the Committee shall appoint an Acharya from the Dharmakul (i.e. from the progeny of Dharmadev, the father of Lord Swaminarayan) as and when he deemd [sic] it fit." Shastri Yajnapurshdas, "Registration of Public Trust: Bochanawasi Shree Akshar Purushottamni Sanstha" (Public Trust number A-1421 Kaira, Baroda, 1954), 3. Even though BAPS centralized both spiritual and administrative authority under the guru, it seems they considered the possibility of decoupling those powers, and returning to the older Swaminarayan administrative model. However, this appointment of a new Ācārya never occurred, and Shastriji Maharaj instead appointed Pramukh Swami as BAPS' administrative head, hence his moniker, Pramukh ("President") Swami.

<sup>11</sup> Yajnapurshdas, "Registration of Public Trust," 1. I have translated the Gujarati theological terms above. The original text reads, "The founder of this institution Pragaṭ Brahma Swarup Sadguru Swami Shri Yajnapurshdasji Shastriji Maharaj is the President of this committee."

<sup>12</sup> Yajnapurshdas, "Registration of Public Trust," 1.

<sup>13</sup> The comparison of contemporary Hindu gurus to a corporate CEO is not novel. Scholars and analysts have often noted their similarities over the last two decades. For just one example, Meera Nanda comments that globalization has led to an efflorescence of gurus and godmen, "who are practically CEOs of huge business empires, know that they operate in a highly competitive spiritualism market and try to differentiate their products." Meera Nanda, *The*

The constitution and appendices lay out objectives for the BAPS president, the administrative committee, and the institution as a whole. Aside from managing BAPS employees, the president's other responsibilities include inviting people to join BAPS; initiating sādhus; propagating BAPS' principles; and appointing the administrative committee members: nine sādhus and sixteen householders.<sup>14</sup> The administrative committee approves the president's appointments and major financial decisions by a simple majority vote. All 26 administrative committee members are allotted one vote, while the president is allotted two votes, in case of a tie.<sup>15</sup> The constitution's "Appendix 2" announces the "objects of the trust" as "public religious worship and propagation of principles of the sect"; the construction of temples, the "general charitable objects," i.e., to "help the poor and distressed," and "to publish literature for advancement of religion."<sup>16</sup> Under the constitution, the guru-executive's mission is to manage BAPS employees, propagate and publish BAPS theology, and help the institution expand.

In Pramukh Swami's decades as guru and president (1971—2016), he changed the orientation of BAPS administrators to be more open to new media technology. For example, in the mid-1980s, BAPS started planning for the first Akshardham temple complex in Gandhinagar, and Pramukh Swami wanted to install high-tech exhibits to narrate the life of Svāminārāyaṇ. He sent a team of sādhus, led by Mahant Swami, to meet with American entertainment professionals and consult with them on animatronics, video displays, and other media for their exhibits. The sādhus

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*God Market: How Globalization is Making India More Hindu* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2009), 92. See also, C. J. Fuller and John Harriss, "Globalizing Hinduism: A 'Traditional' Guru and Modern Businessmen in Chennai," in *Globalizing India: Perspectives from Below*, ed. Jackie Assayag and C. J. Fuller (London: Anthem Press, 2005), 211—234; Sudeep Dasgupta, "Gods in the Sacred Marketplace: Hindu Nationalism and the Return of the Aura in the Public Sphere," in *Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere*, ed. Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 251—272; Shandip Saha, "Hinduism, Gurus, and Globalization," in *Religion, Globalization, and Culture*, ed. Peter Beyer and Lori G. Beaman (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 485—502.

<sup>14</sup> Yajnapurushdas, "Registration of Public Trust," 1—2.

<sup>15</sup> Yajnapurushdas, "Registration of Public Trust," 4.

<sup>16</sup> Yajnapurushdas, "Registration of Public Trust," Appendix 2, 1.

visited Las Vegas and southern California, and they were impressed with what they found. However, when they returned to Pramukh Swami, they expressed some reservations about using these entertainment technologies at a BAPS temple. When Vikram relayed this story to me, he framed their response in terms of “confusion,” saying, “We are confused whether we can use the same technology, because those technologies are used to *excite* people’s senses. Whereas here, we want to use it for our exhibit, but we are confused.” The sādhus raised the point that such media innervate the human senses, entice desires, and often make people more attached to the illusory, material world, which seemed contrary to BAPS’ spiritual goals.

Pramukh Swami decided that, to the contrary, these new media would enable devotees to detach from worldly desires. In Vikram’s mind, the guru resolved the sādhus’ confusion, saying they could use the same technology to help people foster connections with Bhagvān Svāminārāyaṇ. Pramukh Swami’s direction on the first Akshardham exhibits created the Multimedia Cell and set an example for more new media projects in the years to come. The guru directed the MMC to build a theatre with a multi-screen video wall and life-sized dioramas with animatronic figures for the exhibits. As long as their technology was focused on spiritual matters and blessed by the guru, Pramukh Swami’s BAPS would embrace it.

A de-personalized understanding of the BAPS guru’s executive office is often cited to paper over significant differences between the men who lead the organization. The human bodies of Pramukh Swami and Mahant Swami are understood in BAPS theology as temporary vessels of Bhagvān Svāminārāyaṇ’s divine presence on earth. In the BAPS trust, they are lifetime officeholders of the Presidency. Throughout my 2018 fieldwork with BAPS sādhus, volunteers, employees, and devotees, they emphasized an equation and continuity between Pramukh Swami and Mahant Swami. Two years after Pramukh Swami’s passing in August 2016, BAPS satsaṅgis

were still in the midst of a transition of guru leadership. One sādhu working in publications told me, “Mahant Swami *is* Pramukh Swami.” He reflected, “Now there is a new face... the same guṇātīt [transcendent] guru, but the face has changed. And we’ve known Mahan Swami for so long, so it’s not a strange face.” Many others within BAPS echoed this understanding of guru continuity, and Vikram himself reflected that the MMC receives the same divine guidance under Mahant Swami as it did under Pramukh Swami “He [Pramukh Swami] made it very clear from the beginning, and also Mahant Swami Maharaj directs us in the same direction.” In Vikram’s case, it is noteworthy that he perceives such guru continuity, given that in the same conversation, he recalled that Mahant Swami led the team of sādhus who expressed their objections, or “confusion,” about Pramukh Swami’s early media plans. Years later, when Mahant Swami succeeded Pramukh Swami, his designation as guru equated him with his predecessor’s constant, unchanging vision.

At times, Pramukh Swami seemed determined to incorporate certain technology into BAPS programs, despite its expense and impracticality. A second incident, mirroring the first, occurred during the preparations for BAPS’ second Akshardham in New Delhi, where Vikram’s team was assigned to engineer a boat-ride exhibit on Indian history. Pramukh Swami wanted to introduce visitors to Indian civilization on a boat ride, like a South Asian “It’s a Small World” ride. Led by Ishwarcharan Swami, Vikram and his team began consulting with theme-park designers in the United States. The American professionals had engineering experience with similar projects, and they expressed one reservation about the plan: “everyone told us not to use water because water spoils everything, and it’s a big headache.” Vikram and the others were convinced that water was too much of an engineering hassle, so they modified the exhibit plan to propose a car ride instead of a boat ride. But he remembers how Pramukh Swami rejected their modified proposal and remained adamant that the ride must be on water; “He said our civilization grew on riverbanks:

Ganga, Yamuna, Saraswati, and you want to make people sit in an auto-rickshaw?” Vikram was surprised by the rejection but impressed by the guru’s vision. Connecting his exhibit with the long view of civilizational time made Vikram feel inspired like he was serving a higher purpose, so the team returned to the original plan and created the boat ride for Akshardham New Delhi. Despite the aquatic engineering headaches, Vikram believes Pramukh Swami made the right choice by insisting on water.

BAPS devotee-workers trust the guru’s judgment as a matter of faith, and they articulate this trust in both organizational and theological idioms. Employees compliment the guru’s leadership by contrasting his long-term and big-picture thinking against their own smaller, personal concerns. Employees often remarked on the massive scale of the Akshardham temple and *Mystic India* projects, marveling, “How could one person conceive of all this?” Many devotees also take a further step, saying the guru’s divine foresight allows him to predict the future. This comes in addition to his other supernatural mental abilities as the antaryāmī, like reading minds and perceiving devotees’ true intentions. Swaminarayan Aksharpith employees, volunteers, and sādhus believe the guru’s foresight informs his decisions on what technology to use and not. This level of faith in the guru’s executive decisions helps workers like Vikram follow orders even when they disagree.

Employees and volunteers with the MMC are at pains to maintain a proper affective relation to new technology. They want to be engaged with, but not desirous of, the industry’s cutting edge. Vikram described occasions on which Pramukh Swami dissuaded him from using new technology as opportunities to cultivate detachment, or vairāgya. He valued his relationship with the guru because it “gives [him] restraint” from the tech industry’s many allurements. He said, “We are in tech, and we know everything that’s going on. Imagine, we could make video

games, a virtual Akshardham, and kids would love it. But no, we don't want to do that." "Because you need restraint?" I asked. "Exactly," he replied. Like other devotees, Vikram says he needs help from the guru to detach from worldly, material affairs and focus on otherworldly, spiritual matters. Left to his own devices, Vikram fears that his work in the tech industry would make him attached, either to the technology itself or to his egoistic pride in mastering it. In 1998, for example, he attended a conference on virtual reality, and he returned to BAPS, excited to share what he had learned. He described the technology to Pramukh Swami and suggested they could create a virtual reality version of a temple, saying, "it makes you feel like you are actually there," but Pramukh Swami waved off the idea. The guru said he could have the same sensory pleasure of being with Yogiji Maharaj just closing simply his eyes and remembering him. Pramukh Swami said this technology was nothing new and not worth pursuing. Vikram remembers this incident as a lesson not to become overly enamored of new technology and always to trust the guru's discernment (vivek) above his own inclinations.

Vikram acknowledges that such detachment has been challenging in the recent years of social media flux, as new platforms quickly rise and fall in popularity. He says that BAPS has decided to refrain from most social media under the guru's leadership.<sup>17</sup> Swaminarayan Aksharpathi does not commit staff to maintain their social media presence, even though other guru-led groups have invested in staff for Twitter and Facebook posts. Pramukh Swami decided against it, and Mahant Swami has not changed course. Vikram remembers Pramukh Swami telling his team:

We want to sing God's praise and have others sing his praise. If we get too caught up in computers, we will forget God. So we always use discernment [vivek] with technology, and that which is necessary, we will definitely use it. But we don't need to use it just because others are using it.

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<sup>17</sup> Still, BAPS maintains a number of Twitter accounts that post their official announcements, for example: "BAPS Public Affairs," Twitter, [https://twitter.com/baps\\_pubaffairs](https://twitter.com/baps_pubaffairs). Individual temples also maintain Facebook pages, particularly for their youth groups, and some satsaṅgis take vows to make weekly social media posts about their guru, as discussed later in this chapter.

The guru directed the Multimedia Cell to restrain itself and resist the peer pressure of following new trends in social media. Likewise, Vikram believes Mahant Swami provides the same quality of vivek as they continue to navigate the ever-shifting social media terrain. Since the guru's discernment remains uncorrupted by worldly influence, Vikram and the Multimedia Cell understand themselves as a qualitatively different type of tech company.

The guru's leadership allows the Multimedia Cell workers to distinguish themselves from profit-driven or state-sponsored technology corporations because their work is motivated by devotion, not profit. They can become an ascetic tech shop. They see their work serving an other-worldly (alaukik) mission, compared to other careers' worldly (laukik) endeavors. In Vikram's view, the detached work of devotee-employees is more trustworthy because "they are purely connected with satpuruṣ [the guru] and sansthā [BAPS] for their own satsaṅgi motivation, so they have *zero* vested interest." By working for BAPS, devotee-employees demonstrate their pure intentions to serve their guru. They say they have abandoned the desire for wealth or personal status and that their work serves a purpose other than themselves. "They are not here to prove themselves," says Vikram, explaining that sevaks only produce their media because it is God's will, and they have been called to serve. For example, he went on, BAPS began publishing feature-length CGI animated movies about the childhood stories of Svāminārāyaṇ in the 2010s. "Our primary purpose was not to show off." He was bashful about the quality of their work, "We may not be as extraordinary as Disney cartoons. We may not be as extraordinary as Pixar movies, and our business is not that." Rather, they felt compelled to create the cartoons "because once, in a meeting, Ishwarcharan Swami said we need to create a positive alternative for all those messy cartoons" that children watch on TV, and Pramukh Swami agreed. The sādhus believed that children would inevitably watch cartoons, so BAPS should provide parents with a Hindu

alternative to Disney and Pixar. Following the vision of the guru and senior sādhus, workers like Vikram see their media projects as sevā for the other-worldly mission of Bhagvān Svāminārāyaṇ.

*The Multimedia Cell: from Tech Support to Web Design*

The Multimedia Cell's work is different from other BAPS media programs covered in this dissertation because they have no fixed medium of work. Their mission is an open-ended reconnaissance to find the latest available technology, whatever that may be, and incorporate it into BAPS' spiritual programming under the guru's guidance. Vikram and another BAPS volunteer eventually left their jobs and became full-time volunteers for the "Cell," and its monastic title denotes the quasi-ascetic lives they began. They left much of their former lives behind; they now live and work closely with the BAPS sādhus, but their work demanded an uninhibited engagement with the technology industry. Therefore, Pramukh Swami decided it was best for the MMC leaders to remain as householders. Vikram's personal story shows how MMC volunteers carved out a new official and spiritual role for themselves as ascetic tech workers and purveyors of new, digital devotional experiences for BAPS members.

As Vikram worked at ISRO in the early-1990s, he continued volunteering for BAPS on nights and weekends. He saw the ISRO job as a temporary project and awaited the day when Pramukh Swami decided his debt to the nation was repaid. Vikram's ISRO supervisor was also lenient with him, allowing him to leave his desk at 4:00 or 5:00 p.m., when he was supposed to stay until 6:00, because he knew Vikram was volunteering at temple. His project at the time was computerizing the subscription records for BAPS' monthly magazines. Then in 1992, Vikram worked on his first multimedia project in BAPS for planned festivities around the opening of their first Akshardham temple complex in Gandhinagar. Vikram and a team of volunteers created a "Fourteen-Screen Show" with six video screens playing laser disks and eight slide screens with slide projectors combined into one video wall. He called this "a breakthrough year for our tech

team,” saying this Fourteen Screen Show was the first time they used his tech for “mass education.” Pramukh Swami was again impressed with his young engineer-devotees and decided to codify their position as the “Multimedia Cell” in 1992. “Pramukh Swami Maharaj had a very clear vision that this is going to be the future,” says Vikram, referencing the guru’s divine foresight. In the coming years, the Multimedia Cell would undertake such varied projects as an interactive CD-ROM, BAPS websites, apps, films, a boat ride, and fountain shows. Vikram says of their work, “we have been very adventurous.”

In its early years, however, the work of the Multimedia Cell was somewhat less adventurous, more focused on data management and technical support for other BAPS programs. Pramukh Swami finally allowed Vikram to resign from his ISRO job and join BAPS in 1995. He left his parent’s house and moved into the guesthouse at the BAPS temple in Shahibaug, working full time for the Multimedia Cell. Through the mid-90s, Vikram and the MMC digitized all of BAPS’ volunteer infrastructure. To that point, BAPS still used the paper filing system for weekly sabhā attendance that Yogiji Maharaj established through the *Satsaṅg Patrikā* in the late-1950s (see Chapter 2). When the MMC digitized the filing system, Vikram said the main benefit was that “the sādhus were able to do a quantitative analysis of what they were doing” they could see what topics and programs their devotees were interested in, what sabhā services drew greater attendance, and they could adjust their programming accordingly. Vikram believes the “quality of sabhā started improving once we had all the feedbacks, and we were able to compile it in a short time.” In this way, the programming sevā allowed BAPS administrators to manage the raw data of their attendance records more easily and analyze devotee responses on their preaching more quickly. Early on, the MMC served a supportive role in BAPS’ other spiritual activities, but they would also create their own spiritual projects in time.

The Multimedia Cell began producing original spiritual content in 1996 with work on an interactive CD-ROM (see Figure 5.1) that gave virtual tours of their Akshardham temple complex in Gandhinagar. At the time, CD-ROMs were a popular medium for companies and publishers to share content. BAPS published an interactive tour of the Akshardham temple on its CD, along with children’s lessons on Vedic culture and stories from the *Upaniṣads*, *Rāmāyaṇa*, and *Mahābhārata*. The CD’s packaging describes the benefits of the CD in three E’s: Education, Entertainment, and Enlightenment; on the third, it reads, “This is the first CD that allows you to pray and strengthen your faith. The visuals are spiritual, the music elevating. It offers interaction between your innerself and the divine force of God.” In this way, BAPS theologized the technology for its users. This CD-ROM signaled a shift in the work of the Multimedia Cell and the theological work they performed. BAPS claimed the CD-ROM could “strengthen your faith” and help you experience “the divine force of God,” which were the highest theological stakes assigned to a Multimedia Cell project at that time. With the endorsement of the guru, Vikram’s programming gained new spiritual capacities.

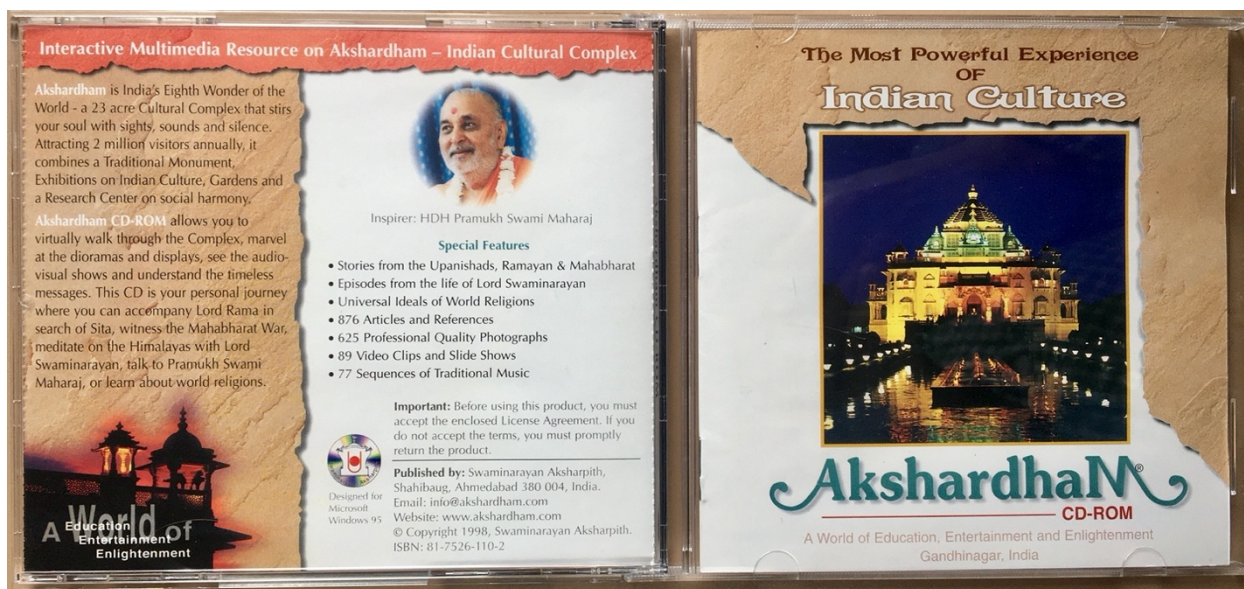


Figure 5.1: Jewel Case of Akshardham CD-ROM, Swaminarayan Aksharpiṭh, 1998.

The newness of *Akshardham CD-ROM* created a spectacle for those devotees with the technology to access it. In *The Cow in the Elevator*, Tulasi Srinivas suggests that new technologies used in ritual induce wonder by creating something shockingly, almost incomprehensibly new that is simultaneously recognizable through the same, familiar referents. For example, when a priest rented a helicopter to air-drop holy water and flower petals on his temple to consecrate a new mūrti, wonder ensued as temple-goers were awed and brought to tears.<sup>18</sup> The crowd had never witnessed a helicopter used in this way. However, they quickly assimilated the sight into a mythical imaginary, naming the helicopter “Garuda,” the divine bird and vehicle of Viṣṇu. The *Akshardham CD-ROM* achieved something similar by delivering the traditional BAPS messages with imagery of a new temple in a cutting-edge technological form. The CD-ROM calls Akshardham “India’s Eighth Wonder of the World,” and it was certainly novel for devotees—Pramukh Swami’s largest construction project at the time, a unique domed architectural style, and BAPS’ first combination of museum, amusement park, and temple in one complex. Its CD representation would have been shockingly new to BAPS devotees in the 1990s. For the first time, the CD-ROM enabled ritual sight of a temple and its mūrtis on a desktop computer. The medium tailored a BAPS spiritual experience to professionals in the Western diaspora, and its English-language audio-visual storybook made it an entertaining resource for diasporic children’s education. At the same time, the classical Hindu myths and stories of Svāminārāyaṇ’s life were repetitious to a BAPS audience, a familiar message from the guru. Pramukh Swami would preach the same points of cultural preservation and vegetarianism for decades, but the new media created a wondrous experience for those devotees with home computers in the 1990s. The Multimedia Cell released the CD-ROM in

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<sup>18</sup> Srinivas, *Cow in the Elevator*, 144.

New York in July 1998, and just as they announced this new publication, they decided to take their work online.

BAPS' entry to the internet raised familiar questions of public representation and sectarian Svāminārāyaṇ rivalries. During their travel to the US to release of *Akshardham CD-ROM*, Vikram sought permission for the Multimedia Cell to launch a BAPS website. He recalled a conversation on July 4, 1998, during a flight from London to New York: "in that flight, the website was born." Sitting on the plane, Vikram discussed the potential benefits of a website to one of the senior sādhus, Viveksagar Swami, when the guru himself expressed interest. As they talked, Vikram saw that Pramukh Swami was seriously considering the possibility of launching a website, so he mentioned one complication: they could not acquire the domain name they wanted, [www.swaminarayan.org](http://www.swaminarayan.org). In 1998, the Ācārya of the Ahmedabad Gadi already owned the domain of [www.swaminarayan.org](http://www.swaminarayan.org) through the ISSO, or International Swaminarayan Satsang Organization. Pramukh Swami asked Vikram why the domain name mattered, and he responded: "If I have [swaminarayan.org](http://www.swaminarayan.org), that gives the first impression to any viewer or any user that this is an *authentic* website. If I say "Swaminarayan-something-something.org," people might feel that they may not be authentic, or they might not be original, something like that." Vikram wanted a domain name to convey his belief that BAPS and its gurus were the "authentic" and direct heirs of Svāminārāyaṇ's "original" teaching. He recalls that Pramukh Swami was less concerned about the domain name and more about the website content, saying, "if we have the right information, if we have authentic information, people will trust that this is an authentic website." In this way, ownership of online domains became entangled with age-old sectarian issues of spiritual authority, authentic divinity, and claims to the legacy of Bhagvān Svāminārāyaṇ.

Pramukh Swami advised Vikram to create their first website under the domain [www.swaminarayan-baps.org](http://www.swaminarayan-baps.org), though questions of online authenticity lingered. Vikram recalls:

At that time Google was not born yet. Only Yahoo was there as a search engine. So I said, if we somehow get a first ranking on Yahoo, then people will find us authentic. [Pramukh Swami] said, how can you have a first rank? I said if more people come to our website, then we can have first rank. And to have more people come to our website because people search on Yahoo, we should be first. So it's more like a chicken-and-egg kind of thing. Only your blessing can help. [Pramukh Swami] said no, no, no, Yogiji will be very pleased. You start our website with the name swaminarayan-baps, and Yogiji will bless you

For Vikram, only the guru's blessing would bring the necessary web traffic to make the website successful and appear authentic on search engines. Pramukh Swami gave this blessing, though indirectly as he often would, through his predecessor and guru, Yogiji Maharaj. The sectarian mentality that "we should be first" among all Svāminārāyaṇ organizations reflects the constitutional mission of the BAPS guru to propagate the sect. With this, Vikram had the spiritual authorization to launch their first website, which he did in late-1998 at [www.swaminarayan-baps.org](http://www.swaminarayan-baps.org). He credits the website's success to the guru's inspiration and blessing. Still, BAPS continued pursuing other Svāminārāyaṇ domain names to maximize their online searchability. In 1999, the ISSO did not pay to renew its control of the Swaminarayan.org domain, and BAPS acquired it, along with Swaminarayan.net and Swaminarayan.com, all of which they still own today. By 2000, BAPS left Swaminarayan-baps.org and made Swaminarayan.org its internet home base (see Figure 5.2).

As for the website's content, the Multimedia Cell saw the website as the quickest way to spread information about BAPS and circulate updates on the guru's activities. They uploaded general information on BAPS' history, gurus, and temples, as they had on *Akshardham CD-ROM*. Additionally, the Cell created a new way for devotees to connect with the guru through online darśan. Vikram said, "Pramukh Swami Maharaj actually suggested us to come up with a way that

devotees, even sitting in their own home, they can connect to satpuruṣ [the guru.]” Initially, the website was catered to the American and British diasporas, according to Vikram. Back then, “our primary purpose actually, our primary target audience was America and UK, those devotees could not travel easily to India.” By contrast, devotees in Gujarat are “lucky” because they can have in-person darśan of the guru more often. In 1998, devotees in the US and UK were also more likely than their



Figure 5.2: Home page of [www.swaminarayan.org](http://www.swaminarayan.org) in August 2000.

Source:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20000816154450/http://www.swaminarayan.org:80/>.

Indian peers to have internet access and a home PC. So Pramukh Swami and the Multimedia Cell imagined the in-home convenience of online darśan would benefit the BAPS diaspora in particular.

The team decided to create a “Vicharan,” (vicaraṇ, “wandering”) section on the website (top-center in Figure 5.2) to give devotees recent images of the guru far more quickly than older BAPS publications. As with vicaraṇ updates in monthly magazines and weekly newsletters, this section of the website covers the guru’s latest travels and activities. A key difference was the speed

at which the website vicaraṅ could circulate new photographs of the guru for darśan. Previously, sādhus and devotees traveling with the guru would take photographs until they finished a complete roll of film. Then they mailed the roll back to the Ahmedabad temple, where staff would develop all the photographs, select a few of them, write a report about the pictured activities, arrange them in the magazine, publish the magazine, and then mail it to their devotees. This whole publishing process created a three- to four-month delay from when a photograph was taken before most devotees could see it. “Now just imagine,” Vikram said, in 1998, “when the website started, *every fifteen days* devotees have fresh darśan of Pramukh Swami Maharaj.” Vikram was proud of the spiritual benefit the MMC’s website delivered to diasporic BAPS devotees. The online vicaraṅ section was immediately popular among devotees, with most of the web traffic coming from North America and the UK. Today, vicaraṅ remains the most-visited section of the website, and new images of the guru are uploaded every day.

Over the following decade, the MMC redesigned their website to make its coding work sustainable for the long-term and maximize user convenience. In the early 2000s, temples mailed photographs and written descriptions of their events to the Multimedia Cell in Ahmedabad, who created a webpage on the site and uploaded the content for each event. Over the years, these discrete event pages piled up, and the online archive expanded to an unmanageable scale. The endless creation of new pages also required the full-time labor of at least one Multimedia worker. To streamline this system, the MMC conducted a major overhaul of the website in 2010, which also transferred the website from Swaminarayan.org to its current domain at baps.org. By 2010, the name of BAPS had become so globally prominent among Hindus that the MMC could drop its concerns about looking authentically Svāminārāyaṅ. The shorter domain name also made the

website more easily searchable. Another MMC volunteer half-joked that the baps.org domain received more web traffic, “because Americans cannot spell.”

Baps.org was an important transition in several respects. The new site runs on a database system, which organizes its archived content by keywords instead of the discrete webpage names. In this system, BAPS events are more easily searchable for both users and administrators. Also, baps.org enables individual temples to upload their own content directly to the site. Vikram explained this became necessary as BAPS continued to grow and more temples wanted their updates posted to the websites; “So the idea around then was to let every center enter its own content on its own reports. That was a revolutionary idea.” The new model saved the Multimedia Cell time and staffing. Outsourcing components of the website sevā to devotees at each temple made the website labor sustainable for the long-term and scalable for future transnational growth. Vikram says “we thought of it as expanding our team.” In 2010, they piloted the new system with ten BAPS temples in the US and UK participating, and by 2018, “Now we have more than 500 centers, and we are expanding. It’s going to be a phenomenon.” With hundreds of devotees creating their own content, many sections of baps.org now operate and update with semi-autonomy, independent of the Multimedia Cell.

The website has grown beyond a symbolic representation of BAPS into an arena for devotional participation in multiple forms of mediation. In Birgit Meyer’s language, the website gives rise to an “aesthetic formation,” a dynamic social process that binds BAPS devotees to one another through the cultivation of a shared sensory mode of perceiving the divine.<sup>19</sup> As devotees practice daily worship of these guru images, they hone the embodied technique of sensing Bhagvān

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<sup>19</sup> Birgit Meyer, “Introduction: From Imagined Communities to Aesthetic Formations: Religious Mediations, Sensational Forms, and Styles of Binding,” in *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion and the Senses*, ed. Birgit Meyer (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) 6—11.

Svāminārāyaṇ's presence in the form of the guru: his posture during rituals, his saffron robes, his expressions and gestures, the flowers and sweets he offers to mūrtis, and the decorations surrounding him. All devotees attune their senses to the same guru aesthetics and share a palette for what divinity and devotion look like. Furthermore, devotees actively perform their shared aesthetics by decorating their temples and conducting events—holiday celebrations and charity events—that mimetically follow the guru's example. As temples post coverage of their events on the BAPS website, they inscribe themselves into the transnational social formation of BAPS, binding themselves to other temples and the guru. Creating these posts also involves new forms of media sevā for the devotees in each temple who curate their events, stage photographs, write summaries, and upload content to the website. In this way, devotees use the website to participate in the aesthetic formation of BAPS, both by consuming and producing its content.

The successes of their Fourteen-Screen Show, *Akshardham CD-ROM*, and websites demonstrate to Multimedia Cell workers that their guru predicted the technological future. By founding the MMC in 1992, he enabled the wonder of the *CD-ROM* as a first computer-based experience of “the divine force of God.” Then, the blessings from Yogiji and Pramukh Swami gave the BAPS websites a theological purpose, to connect souls with the brahmasvarūpa guru and the appearance as an authentic Svāminārāyaṇ space. For Vikram, the website-supported devotional community and media sevā manifest the guru's clear vision from the 1990s. Their faith in the guru's foresight sustained the MMC workers through the years as they approached even more ambitious projects and adapted to ever-changing technologies.

### *Making Mystic India*

In the early 2000s, the Multimedia Cell was reassigned to assist preparations for a second Akshardham temple complex in New Delhi. Vikram worked on the boat ride mentioned above, while others from the MMC joined a new film project. The BAPS senior sādhus decided to create

a film about Svāminārāyaṇ to screen at their second Akshardham complex, and they chose his teenage travels around South Asia as its narrative. They believed that the pilgrimage of young Sahajānand Svāmī, known as Nīlkaṇṭh, up the Himalayan mountains and down to the southern tip of the peninsula, would make for an enjoyable destination film, appealing to foreign and domestic tourists in the Indian capital. They also decided to shoot the film for an IMAX theatre, requiring special equipment and personnel with large-format filming experience, which they ultimately found in an American director and cinematographer. The entire film project was completed between 2003 and 2005, from concept to screen, which was incredibly fast, and they titled this work *Mystic India*.

*Mystic India* was an effort in mass volunteer mobilization, as BAPS saved on filming costs by recruiting volunteers for most jobs in front of and behind the camera. The American IMAX filmmakers initially proposed to bring dozens of crew members to India for filming, but BAPS requested they bring the bare minimum number of staff. Ultimately, the American crew reduced to ten members. BAPS replaced the other crew and much more with hundreds of devotee sevaks. The Multimedia Cell was subsumed into the larger *Mystic India* project, consisting of twenty departments of volunteers handling all aspects of filming, such as location scouting, travel, accommodations, research, set design and construction, costumes, and extras. Another original member of the Multimedia Cell became the lead volunteer for the film. He was joined by a total of 570 BAPS devotees who worked full-time behind the scenes in these volunteer departments, and they coordinated thousands more devotees as extras. Some of the film's crowd scenes, like that of the Rath Yatra procession in Puri, contained 8,000 extra actors. Many BAPS devotees fondly remember their experience as extras, their period costumes, and long shooting days. Several devotees I interviewed in 2018 described their roles in various scenes and how they saw the

opportunity as a blessing from the guru. In total, the filming of *Mystic India* had 45,000 extras, which BAPS was able to organize through its temples and volunteer departments. One lead Multimedia Cell volunteer, Rahul, reflected on the mass devotee effort behind the film: “As a voluntary organization, our strength is the volunteers.”

At the same time, BAPS viewed every detail of the filming process through a religious lens. Rahul is a life-long volunteer for BAPS and a long-time member of the Multimedia Cell who also worked on *Mystic India*. He coordinated between the film crew and BAPS’ volunteer departments, and he scouted locations for filming. One of the most important decisions he worked on was the selection of two child actors to play the young Sahajānand Svāmī. Rahul explained the spiritual stakes of choosing someone to perform as Sahajānand on screen: “devotees don’t just look at them as actors, and still not fully Bhagvān, but somewhere in between.” BAPS knew whatever actors played the role would always be affiliated with Svāminārāyaṇ, so during auditions, they considered the actors’ character and personal life in addition to their acting ability and screen presence.

Rahul says BAPS viewed the *Ramayana* TV serial as a “learning case.” They did not want an actor who would become entangled with controversy or politicking. In the background, anxieties remained from the cross-pollination of the *Ramayana* serial and the BJP’s Ram Janmabhumi movement that destroyed Barbari Masjid in 1992.<sup>20</sup> *Mystic India* was another visual representation of an essentially Hindu India, but BAPS wanted it to inspire peace and not violence. As they approached the 2005 Akshardham New Delhi opening, the memory of the 2002 attack on Akshardham Gandhinagar was still fresh in the mind of BAPS sevaks.<sup>21</sup> Gujarat’s Hindu-Muslim

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<sup>20</sup> Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics After Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>21</sup> Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi, *Pogrom in Gujarat: Hindu Nationalism and Anti-Muslim Violence in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

violence had spilled over into its temple, killing thirty-eight. BAPS was still committed to producing mass mediations and iconic temples, but now with additional discipline for its mediators and heightened security at its temples.

Hoping to avoid controversy, Rahul and a BAPS team began an audition process for two male child actors, ages eleven and fourteen, with a call for videotaped interviews. They received 11,500 video submissions for their first round of interviews. Rahul described the massive search process, watching thousands of interview tapes, “very similar to Harry Potter.” After several rounds of auditions, they ultimately selected two boys from Ahmedabad, both of whom were raised in BAPS satsaṅgi families. The boys’ BAPS affiliation allayed the Cell’s concerns of child actors going rogue or gaining notoriety in the future. Still, they also expected the actors to practice embodying their divine persona before filming.

The younger boy, Latesh Patel, had never acted prior to *Mystic India*, but his devotional discipline was just as important, if not more so, for BAPS. In a “Making of Mystic India: Casting”

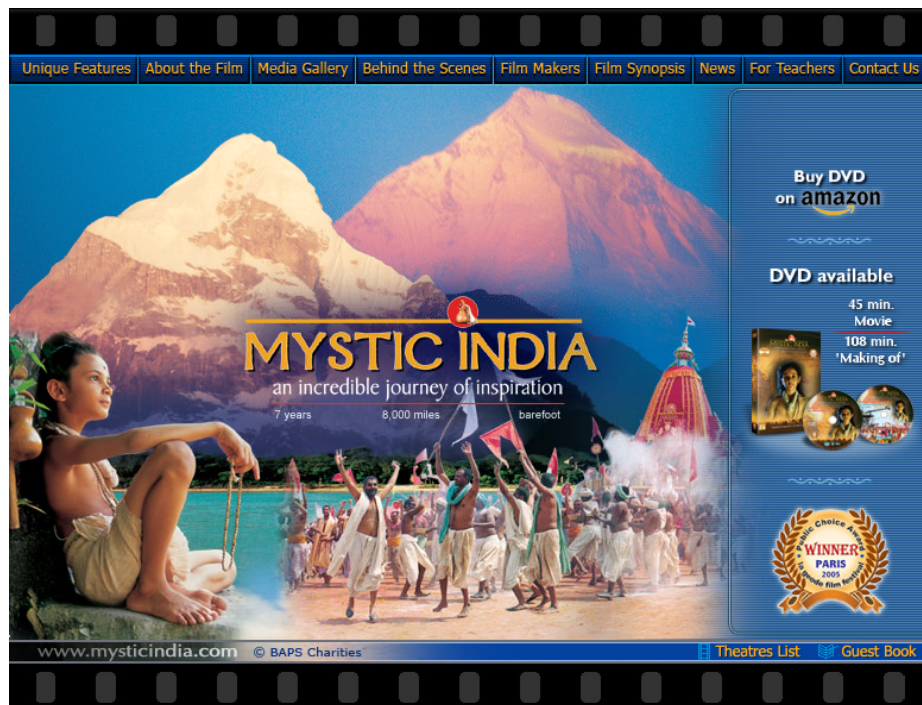


Figure 5.3: [www.mysticindia.com](http://www.mysticindia.com) accessed on February 3, 2020. The child actor, Latesh Patel is seated on the left.

video, one sādhu explains that Patel’s pre-film training was, “the Nīlkaṇṭh-ization of Latesh.”<sup>22</sup> For six weeks beforehand, the eleven-year-old Latesh underwent daily spiritual training: he meditated for one hour, performed ritual bathing, worshiped Svāminārāyaṇ, practiced postural yoga, and learned the story of Nīlkaṇṭh. This sādhu went on, “In every aspect, he was actually doing the same motions and the same acting, in the same way that he would do, that Nīlkaṇṭh Varṇī would do.” They believed that intensive bodily discipline would change the actors into proper representatives of the young Sahajānand. Since the filming, BAPS has been satisfied with its choice of actors: one boy became a professional dancer and instructor of classical Indian nṛtya (dance), and the other, Latesh, took initiation as a BAPS sādhu after graduating from college.

*Mystic India* became another instantiation of the guru’s divine mental powers, especially for the grandiosity of his vision. With its massive scale, every filming task seemed beyond the capacity of any individual or group of volunteers, like finding their two lead actors from the thousands of audition tapes. One lead volunteer expressed his amazement with their casting decision, saying, “it was simply a divine selection.”<sup>23</sup> In this manner, BAPS volunteers describe almost every dimension of filmmaking as directed by God. *Mystic India* was such a massive undertaking that only the guru’s supernatural vision seemed able to comprehend it all.

#### *Anand’s Sevā-Career*

*Mystic India*’s two-year timeline rushed the staff to complete the film in time for the opening of Akshardham New Delhi in 2005 and pushed many of the BAPS workers outside of their comfort zone. Workers in the Multimedia Cell left their standard job responsibilities to handle the miscellaneous filming tasks, big and small, to ensure production was finished on time. Anand

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<sup>22</sup> “Casting: The Making of Mystic India,” BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, Swaminarayan Aksharpith, accessed October 6, 2020, [https://www.baps.org/Publications/Video/Intorduction/Mystic-India-783.aspx?CM\\_id=1412](https://www.baps.org/Publications/Video/Intorduction/Mystic-India-783.aspx?CM_id=1412).

<sup>23</sup> “Casting: The Making of Mystic India,” [https://www.baps.org/Publications/Video/Intorduction/Mystic-India-783.aspx?CM\\_id=1412](https://www.baps.org/Publications/Video/Intorduction/Mystic-India-783.aspx?CM_id=1412).

was one such MMC employee who began working on the BAPS website in 1999, but *Mystic India* forced him to take on several extra jobs. He designed the layout for a movie website at [www.mysticindia.com](http://www.mysticindia.com) and created the movie poster and logo for the film (see Figure 5.3). Once filming began, Anand supported the professional crew, for example, designing the ID badges that staff used around the filming site. He also collaborated with the film's lead volunteer by drawing storyboards of the scenes to help him convey BAPS' vision to the director and cinematographer. For one of his more enjoyable assignments, Anand served as an extra in a few scenes. He and his wife were featured together in one scene, a personal highlight for them and their family. However, working for BAPS confused his spiritual life with his job expectations in a way that ultimately became unsustainable for Anand. He later decided to leave the Multimedia Cell for a less demanding and better-compensating job with an advertising firm. This section explores BAPS' working conditions and spiritual expectations of Anand and their many other salaried employees.

The majority of workers in BAPS' press, Swaminarayan Aksharpith, are full-time employees of the guru's organization. Unlike the volunteers, whose families support them financially, the rest of the roughly one hundred fifty Aksharpith workers receive salaries from BAPS, most at pay rates lower than industry standards. The Multimedia Cell of 2018, for example, was an eleven-man team, and everyone other than Vikram was salaried. Within the Aksharpith building, there are several other employee departments: around two dozen manual laborers work the printing press, bookbinding machines, packaging, and loading the publications onto shipping trucks. A half-dozen workers in the supply office handle all of the stock and orders for ink and paper. There is also a small office that handles BAPS' calendar art, a subscription office for their devotional magazines, a Desktop Publications (DTP) office with eighteen employees who write, copy-edit, and graphic design the monthly magazines, an English Publications Department, a

Design Department with around fifteen graphic designers, and an IT department with three employees who handle hardware and software issues for the rest of the press. BAPS sādhus supervise every Aksharpith department. Above all these sādhu supervisors is Ishwarcharan Swami, who is responsible for all of the Swaminarayan Aksharpith programs. As a senior sādhu, Ishwarcharan Swami is one of a handful of sādhus who each oversee a wing of BAPS activities and report directly to the guru. Within this structure, the workers of Swaminarayan Aksharpith have sādhus as supervisors, Ishwarcharan Swami as a boss, with only the administrative committee and guru-president above him.

The BAPS guru and sādhus wield both spiritual and economic authority over the Aksharpith employees. Many employees are also devotees. Volunteers like Vikram and Rahul emphasize that “there’s not a cut and dry difference between volunteers and staff. Everyone is working here out of devotion.” For those whose families depend on their salaries, their labor is constituted as both work and worship. During my archival research, I worked in the Desktop Publications office for roughly one month, and I realized that volunteers like Vikram and Rahul are exceptional cases. The rank and file of BAPS media workers are middle-class professionals with a far more precarious professional status that adds expectations of their personal lives as satsaᅅgis to the daily stress of their careers. While their work in Swaminarayan Aksharpith is often fueled by devotion, their jobs are also integrated into the wider Gujarati economy and conform to many norms of globalized office culture. Most salaried workers at Swaminarayan Aksharpith are full devotees, whose personal conduct is supervised by sādhus, and full professionals, whose skills and experience are recognized around the Gujarati publishing industry.

The daily schedule of the DTP office, along with the other Aksharpith departments, follows the hours of operation typical of many Gujarati offices. The office runs six days a week, Monday

through Saturday. Employees arrive at their desks around 10:00 a.m., they break for lunch around noon, have afternoon tea around 2:00 p.m., and work until 6:00 p.m., at least. The DTP office itself has a modern aesthetic: white marble floors shine under the bright florescent tube lights, built-in desks above-head cabinets line the walls, all in a matching two-toned brown faux-wood paneling. AC units and fans keep the office consistently chilly, even in the scorching Ahmedabad summer. Most workers sit in plastic stackable chairs and dress in business casual; shirts and dress pants; no ties, but most have the tilak-cāndlo on their foreheads. Each employee uses their own desktop computer, and the office shares a communal copier-printer.

Their daily routine is also punctuated with the ritual practices expected of BAPS devotees. As staffers arrive, one by one, they reach down to touch the feet of the co-workers already at their desks, out of respect. Whenever sādhus first enter the office, everyone jumps up from their places to touch their feet. At 10:15 a.m., the staff gathers for a morning ārtī before a mūrti of Bhagvān Svāminārāyaṇ and the BAPS guru lineage. They play the ārtī music from one of the computers, and the staff clap and sing along (see Figure 5.4). After lunch each day, the office holds a 10- to 15-minute sabhā with a reading from scripture or devotional literature. A monthly sabhā schedule is posted by the office door, assigning one staff member to lead the session each day. The sādhus lead office sabhā on Mondays, and every Saturday sabhā is a “video darśan” session when they watch a recent video of the guru’s travels and discourses on the BAPS website.



*Figure 5.4: The DTP office singing morning ārtī. Photo by author.*

Salaried workers in the Multimedia Cell had similar experiences with those in the DTP office, combining their sevā and careers. Anand worked as a Graphic Artist for BAPS' websites and other media from December 1999 to April 2008. He was not born to a Svāminārāyaṇ family but first connected with BAPS in 1982 when his neighbors introduced him to some sādhus during their celebration of Yogiji Maharaj's 100<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary. After the celebration, Anand started attending a BAPS youth group regularly and eventually became close with Aksharvatsal Swami, who also oversees the DTP office. In university, Anand studied computer programs in graphic design, learned to use auto-cad, and gave occasional sevā with BAPS in his free time. He became more interested in the DTP and MMC work when he heard about their *Akshardham CD-ROM*. He was hired by the Multimedia Cell in December 1999 as they developed BAPS' early websites. At

that point, Vikram and the MMC were transitioning from Swaminarayan-baps.org to Swaminarayan.org and needed more website staff.

Through his years with the Multimedia Cell, Anand's job responsibilities shifted with each new project the Cell undertook. Initially, Anand was tasked with designing a new website layout for Swaminarayan.org and maintaining the vicaraṇ section. Every fifteen days, he developed the latest photos of Pramukh Swami, scanned a few, edited the images, and uploaded them to the site. As BAPS created additional websites, Anand designed their layouts as well. In December of 2000, the team began developing a site for their temple in London at [www.mandir.org](http://www.mandir.org). He worked on the [www.akshardham.com](http://www.akshardham.com) website for Gandhinagar's Akshardham temple complex and in 2005 adapted the site to include New Delhi Akshardham. These websites were geared towards outside guests, providing information on hours of operation, parking, and visitor guidelines. Anand also designed the website for BAPS Charities, then called "BAPS Care International," which explains their international charity projects: food drives, walk-a-thons, disaster relief efforts, and medical fairs.

Of all his projects, though, Anand remembers the two years spent on *Mystic India* from 2003 to 2005 as the most intense. The Multimedia Cell regularly worked long hours to make their timeline and complete the film before the Akshardham grand opening. Anand said, "During the movie, sometimes we worked all night." He would leave home at 9:00 a.m. and not come back until 4:00 a.m. the next day. The "Shahibaug [temple] was our second home." Some Multimedia Cell members often slept just three hours a night and skipped important family events for filming. The long hours kept Anand away from his family and his wife, Bharati, although she said supportively, "I never worry about him when he's there. I know he eats. I know he's taken care of." His family understood the project was important to Anand and trusted he was in good hands

at the BAPS temple. Anand says, despite the overtime, “actually, nothing feels hectic there. It’s like a family coming together to work. And also it’s sevā.” When the work became especially demanding, Anand turned to his spiritual motivations, to give sevā and please his guru, as an incentive to go above and beyond his official job responsibilities. Still, he could not match the level of dedication he saw in the volunteers like Vikram and Rahul; “even living in society, they work like sādhus.” Their level of commitment approached this-worldly asceticism, which was both inspiring and unattainable for Anand, whose family needed both his salary and his personal time. In this way, salaried workers like Anand occupy a more ambiguous status with implicit expectations to match the standards of sādhu-like dedication if and when the guru requests it. Their commitment to career-sevā is held up against the high bar of their quasi-renunciant volunteer colleagues, who are freed from such financial and familial responsibilities. Eventually, as these workplace demands persisted, Anand decided to move on from the Multimedia Cell and find another job.

Fortunately for Anand, the skills and experience with the Multimedia Cell made him a qualified candidate for other graphic design careers outside the temple. Anand decided to leave the Multimedia Cell when he and Bharati had their first son, and he needed more money to support their growing family. He was also interested in working in advertising and transition from digital to print media. He gave notice to the Multimedia Cell that he intended to leave, and though sad to see him go, they supported Anand in his job transition. Ishwarcharan Swami wrote a recommendation letter for him on BAPS letterhead, saying Anand “has performed his duties responsibly and diligently, from December 1999 onwards until April 2008, towards developing these websites. [Anand] has excellent artistic and graphic skills, and we wish and pray for his continued success.” The letter was a boon for Anand. Ishwarcharan Swami is well known and

highly regarded around Gujarat, and his lofty title as BAPS’ “International Convenor” conveyed the authority of his station, so the positive letter carried weight. Anand quickly found a job with an advertising firm in Ahmedabad, where he continued to work when we spoke in 2018. He showed me an example of his work in a recent newspaper: an advertisement for a fitness studio showing a bathroom scale with a measuring tape wrapped around its middle like a waistline. After his sevā-career with Swaminarayan Aksharpith, working on so many different media projects, Anand was more than qualified for this creative advertising work. Even though Aksharpith workers consider themselves set apart from the rest of the capitalist publishing industry, their labor nevertheless translates to wider industry expectations.

Leaving his position in BAPS allowed Anand to disentangle his devotional life from his career. Anand is still a satsaṅgi in BAPS and maintains contact with his former co-workers from the Multimedia Cell. His son attends a prestigious BAPS boys’ school outside of Ahmedabad and is coming of age as an active satsaṅgi himself. Anand relays fond memories of his time working for BAPS, but he is also relieved by the consistent schedule and lower personal stakes of his advertising job. He enjoys working with his advertising clients and appreciates that each client brings a “simple, stand-alone job.” Once he finishes their ad, he is free to move on to the next client. This is a marked departure from the “non-stop” and “continuous work” he described with BAPS. The combination sevā and career made the MMC work doubly rewarding, like when Pramukh Swami honored him on stage for his work on the Akshardham website. However, the sevā-career combination threatened to overtake the rest of his life, as the *Mystic India* project often did. Anand’s departure from the Multimedia Cell restored his work-life balance without severing his connections in the BAPS spiritual network that still supports his family.

The experiences of salaried workers in the DTP office and Multimedia Cell casts into relief the form of this-worldly asceticism practiced by volunteers like Vikram and Rahul. For those who choose to start a family or pursue a career, a short-term job at BAPS' Swaminarayan Aksharpith can be a period of selfless service or a stepping-stone to less stressful and more lucrative positions. However, with responsibilities outside the temple, some salaried workers also find this sevā-career overly intense and burn-out inducing. By contrast, volunteers like Rahul and Vikram live in the Shahibaug temple, do not marry, and remain free to dedicate their entire lives to the media work. The salaried co-workers perceive them to “work as hard as sādhus” because of their apparent detachment from any worldly concerns. Still, the volunteers answer to the sādhus and ultimately to the guru for their work, and it is this position within the BAPS hierarchy that enables their mode of detachment. In this final section, I return to Vikram's story to consider IT anxieties about the unknown future of technology and how the guru's foresight guides new technological sevā.

#### *Updating BAPS Tech*

In the years since *Mystic India*, rapid changes in consumer-level digital technology have forced the Multimedia Cell to reevaluate and update their digital media projects constantly. For example, Vikram explained that in the early-2000s, they imagined their online audience as the American and British diasporas. In those years, their web traffic was 70% from North America, 20% from the UK, and 10% from the rest of the world, according to Vikram. However, in the early-2010s, as smartphones and cellular data became affordable in India, baps.org began receiving far more web traffic from Indian IP addresses. “Because of the data revolution here in India, things have completely changed,” Vikram says. In 2018, an average of 70- and 80,000 discrete users visited baps.org per day, but their audience's location had flipped entirely. Between 2016 and 2018, 60-65% of their web traffic came from Indian users, followed by North Americans, then

British users. Vikram was surprised by the site's new Indian audience but still attributes the web traffic to Pramukh Swami's blessing in 1998.

Another unforeseen change has been the dominance of mobile devices within the overall computing industry. When the Multimedia Cell developed a mobile app for daily darśan in 2012, they outsourced the app design to a third-party firm. No one in the Cell was trained in app development, and they assumed the app was a one-time project. Since then, the popularity of smartphones in India and abroad has made apps more significant than he anticipated. Vikram explained how shifts in the tech industry changed their thinking on apps:

[a] few years back, we did not feel that we would need an in-house team to develop apps on a regular basis or at a mass scale, but things have shifted. In the last couple years, the whole industry has shifted to be more on the app-based experience rather than the web-based experience, and recently, Google actually introduced a top-level domain—it's called "tld" in our terminology—.app. Just like you have .com, just like you have .net, now there is .app, so it's clear there is a paradigm shift. The whole industry is moving toward mobile apps, so it's the right time.

Here, Vikram describes his work in the Multimedia Cell as an insider of "the industry" of high tech, explaining "our terminology" to me, an outsider. It is important for him to keep abreast of the latest developments and follow the "paradigm shift" in his field. As part of this effort, BAPS overhauled its website again in 2018, staying at the baps.org domain but using a new adaptive format that adjusts content for viewing on multiple devices and screen sizes: desktop, laptop, tablet, and smartphone. Furthermore, in 2018 BAPS began assembling an in-house team of app developers, as they consider what an app-based experience of BAPS will be in the future. With an anxious eye fixed on the industry's paradigm shifts, Vikram worries BAPS could be left behind.

More than tech industry trends, the guru's executive authority guides the MMC. The guru's constitutional mission to reach devotee communities in poor and rural areas requires the MMC to work with multiple generations of media technology at the same time. As Rahul pointed out, new

tech developments spread unevenly, and BAPS wants to deliver its content through whichever medium is available to devotees in all areas of its transnational network. For example, when the Ahmedabad sādhus decide to screen a movie about Pramukh Swami during sabhā, they distribute the movie to their hundreds of temples through several means. Most temples outside of India receive the digital movie file through the cloud computing service “Box.” BAPS staff also copy the movie onto DVDs for those in rural areas and mails it by overnight courier service to the villages. As DVD players are phasing out, the staff also mail USB drives containing the movie file, although the cost of USB drives is substantially higher than that of a blank DVD (Ru. 125 v. Ru. 10). The USB system may be too costly in the future, but in 2018, BAPS was waiting to see how quickly internet connectivity would improve in Gujarati villages and what medium would become most user-friendly. MMC workers follow the guru president’s guidance even when it assigns them to give sevā in obsolescent technologies.

MMC projects create and re-create new forms of devotional practice for BAPS members with every new media technology. For one example of this, I return to the Desai family in Ahmedabad, mentioned in Chapters 3 and 4. As their daughter, Archana pursued her studies in dentistry college, she also gave several forms of sevā at her neighborhood BAPS female youth-group (yuvatī maṇḍal). In 2018, she signed a BAPS niyam (vow) card (see Figure 5.5), committing herself to several forms of daily worship and sevā: ten minutes a day for darśan of BAPS videos, five minutes a day for thought and prayer about Pramukh Swami. With her fourth check on the pledge card (in the blue rectangle), Archana also committed to circulate one post per week about Pramukh Swami either on WhatsApp or other social media.<sup>24</sup> As mentioned above, BAPS

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<sup>24</sup> The niyam reads: Each week I will share one story about Pramukh Swami with my relations: “Dar aṭhvāḍiye Pramukhsvāmī Mahārājno ek prasaṅg sagā-ranehīne jaṅāvīś.” Then the card gives options for ways to share stories: Speaking/Letter/E-mail/WhatsApp/Social Media: “Kahīne/Patra/I-meil/VoṭṣEp/Sośiyal Mīḍiyā.”

generally refrains from investing staff or resources in social media. These niyam commitments help BAPS outsource the media work to their young volunteers and create a new social media sevā.

The MMC's work grants the guru and his institution the appearance of anticipating new media trends and their future use for BAPS. This niyam card displays the BAPS logo (bottom-left), and the name of the BAPS "Central Satsaᅅg Activities Office" (satsaᅅg pravᅅrtti madhyasth kāryālay) in Ahmedabad.

Devotees like Archana know that BAPS officially sanctions social media sevā and

believe it will advance the BAPS community. The top of the card explains that this sevā helps BAPS prepare for their celebration of Pramukh Swami's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. During our Spring 2018 conversation, the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday was still over three years away, in December 2021. BAPS is always planning ahead, and every large event becomes a massive sevā mobilization effort. With cards like this, the BAPS quickly updates new forms of sevā on a mass scale. This particular card also authorizes media sevā as valid, like the consumption of BAPS videos on YouTube and circulation of Pramukh Swami-media on WhatsApp. The MMC's advances ripple through the work of all BAPS departments, like the Central Office for Community Development, and their

Figure 5.5: BAPS niyam (vow, rule) card in preparation for the December 2021 "Pramukh Swami Maharaj Shatabdi Mahotsav" from Ahmedabad's Central Satsaᅅg Activities Department.

focus on devotee experience creates widespread, digital modes of devotional practices, like sharing guru-darśan videos online.

*Conclusion: Ascetic Tech Shop*

This chapter has argued that the Multimedia Cell workers give the BAPS guru an ability to navigate and seemingly predict the future of technology. The guru's constitutional authority and theological status already make him well suited to adopt new media for BAPS. As its president, he has a mandate to propagate the sect's teaching, and his authority over the MMC gives him ready access to the latest technology. Theologically, as the brahmasvarūp guru, he is perceived by BAPS followers as Svāminārāyaṇ's constant presence on Earth, and the continual revelation of his life creates an indefinite need for devotees to refresh their connection through his mass mediations. Pramukh Swami set a precedent for BAPS to be invested in and adventurous with the latest media technologies, and establishing the Multimedia Cell in 1992 institutionalized this approach. Their work began in a supportive role, digitizing attendance and volunteer records for other BAPS programs, which practically benefitted the organization by making their internal data more accessible and easier to analyze. The MMC also pursued its own spiritual projects, beginning with the 1992 Multimedia Show, then the *Akshardham CD-ROM*, BAPS websites, *Mystic India*, and mobile apps. In these projects, the guru empowered Vikram, Rahul, and the team to create new spiritual experiences and new forms of devotional service for BAPS satsaṅgis. The Multimedia Cell's unending work of updating BAPS tech makes the guru appear constantly ahead of the technological curve, such that it reinforces a belief in his divine foresight.

The Multimedia Cell is an ascetic tech shop in two senses. Firstly, it is supervised by renunciant sādhus and ultimately controlled by the guru. The BAPS guru is uniquely positioned to decide which technologies are appropriate to use, spiritually uplifting, and which technologies are addictive worldly attachments. MMC workers defer to the guru's judgment because of his

authority as president and a belief in his supernatural mental abilities. Some employees, like Anand, find his combination of devotional and professional demands to be overly taxing; the work threatens to consume their entire lives in pursuit of realizing the guru's vision. For life-long volunteers like Vikram, the Multimedia Cell moves intentionally slower than the rest of the tech industry because they always wait for the guru's approval. They maintain older generations of tech because they prioritize reaching his devotees through any accessible medium. Thus, the MMC accelerates and decelerates projects at the guru's discretion. They develop certain technologies— websites, boat rides, and CGI cartoons—and eschew others—virtual reality and social media. Their ascetic leadership controls and evaluates the Multimedia Cell's work by the spiritual criteria of how it benefits the souls of BAPS devotees.

Secondly, the Multimedia Cell is an ascetic tech shop in the sense that its workers inculcate a detached relation to technology and pursue an ideal of this-worldly asceticism. MMC members believe their work serves a higher purpose and purifies their souls. When we spoke, Vikram often distinguished himself and his motives from other, profit-driven tech workers by emphasizing that his work is grounded in devotion for his guru and Bhagvān Svāminārāyaṇ. His spiritual motivations push him to keep up to date with the latest tech and industry trends, but with the guru's guidance, he feels able to remain detached from its materialism. Since they never know where new technologies and paradigm shifts will lead them, workers of the MMC depend on the guru's restraint to check their enthusiasm. Without the guru's supervision, Vikram believes, this techno-spiritual power would go to his head; he might become overly attached or misuse it for personal gain. Vikram habitually denies his impulses in the MMC projects, which is precisely the point. He wants to overcome his ego, eliminate his pride, and detach from this world, all of which prepares him for spiritual liberation.

The Multimedia Cell is unique within the Swaminarayan Aksharpath because of its open-ended, experimental mission to work with whatever new technology becomes helpful for the guru. Unlike the staff who handle BAPS' newsletter, magazines, press coverage, and standardized tests, the Multimedia Cell's sevā is entirely reinvented every few years. In this sense, volunteers like Vikram, who dedicate their lives to the MMC, make a vow to work with the unknown. They are full-time practitioners of experimental Hinduism, working on the frontiers of technology to harness unbridled innovation for a theological purpose. They are driven forward by a need to avoid the unknown dangers in future technologies. Vikram's self-doubt and anxiety that he may mishandle future tech is only assuaged by his trust in the guru's ability to presage these challenges and predetermine the correct path for their work and worship. He feels empowered to continue experimenting by the guardrails of the guru's foresight.

Vikram's faith in the guru has been enriched by his three decades of unpredictable work, ever since his guru became his tech executive. In 1990, Vikram did not know why Pramukh Swami rejected his offer to be a full-time volunteer. Now in hindsight, it seems the guru was testing his dedication to BAPS. Back then, he did not know that a website would be necessary; now it is one of his most popular and successful creations. He did not know that he would engineer a boat ride in 2004 or assemble an in-house app design team in 2018. However, he believes that Pramukh Swami knew all along, and that Mahant Swami now holds the same omniscient guru consciousness. On the cutting edge of technology, Vikram is uneasily flying blind, and it is only a belief in the guru's divine foresight that allays his fears. His form of experimental Hinduism does not seek to change this Svāminārāyaṇ organization for a new world; rather, he seeks to conform new technology to the guru's unchanging and traditional vision.

Epilogue:  
Hindutva, Sevā, and Caste in American Hinduism

In February of 2018, I was browsing, somewhat aimlessly, through the Twitter posts of BAPS devotees when I came across an account that left me flummoxed. The account user, whom I'll call "Patel," lived in California and represented himself as a progressive activist, non-profit worker, part of the anti-Trump resistance, and also an ardent supporter of Narendra Modi and the BJP. Patel's Tweets focused mainly on 1) his community organizing work supporting black and brown parents and undocumented immigrants, 2) BAPS celebrations and charity events, and 3) the national Indian revival he saw taking place under the Modi government. Patel's Twitter was the first and most outspoken example I encountered of this provocative political mediation, but he was certainly not alone. Other BAPS devotees and American Hindus likewise posted support for a just, multiracial democracy in the US and a majoritarian Hindu government in India. I was initially thrown by Patel's politics, but as I went about exploring Svāminārāyaṇ sevā and mass mediation, other questions lingered: What cause are these Tweets serving? What kind of sevā does this mediation give rise to?

This dissertation has argued that the transnational guru is produced through the devotees' labor in mediation, in the form of sevā, and it also suggests that mass mediation has become an arena of popular devotional practice. As Chapter 1 outlined, Sahajānand Svāmī formed a diverse mosaic tradition that defined community through strict codes of conduct fostering a collective ethic of vairāgya (detachment). Later Svāminārāyaṇ organizations, like BAPS, established particular sectarian interpretations of his teaching to anchor new communities around a guru as the ultimate arbiter of proper vairāgya and spiritual pleasure. The transnational guru is now dependent upon devotees' media sevā, and has been since the 1950s, as Chapter 2 describes, when publishers and readers of the magazine *Svāminārāyaṇ Prakāś* and newsletter *Satsaṅg Patrikā* established his

spiritual omnipresence around their transnational network. The routinized publicity sevā, discussed in Chapter 3, spreads the perception that BAPS gurus inherited Sahajānand's divine authority in Gujarat and positions them as international ambassadors for Hinduism. The test-takers and graders of Satsang Exams, from Chapter 4, manifest the guru's panoptic, antaryāmī (indwelling driver) omniscience through their rote memorization and "objective" evaluation practices. The Multimedia Cell's tech workers in Chapter 5 afford the guru divine foresight by keeping him on the cutting of new technology while remaining utterly detached from it.

In many ways, this creation of a mass-mediated, transnational guru has served to buttress the legitimacy of Narendra Modi's brand of Hindu Nationalism. The enormous spiritual, institutional, and financial power that BAPS consolidates in the singular, celibate figurehead of the guru parallels Modi's Hindutva persona. Supporters see the Prime Minister's power deriving from his brahmacharya (celibacy) discipline that makes him both a pious Hindu exemplar and an efficacious political leader. These two abstinent holy men reinforce one another's authority, as when Modi mourned Pramukh Swami's passing in 2016, and when Mahant Swami celebrated Modi's electoral victory in 2019.<sup>1</sup> As I describe in Chapter 3, BAPS' massive international temples now function as Hindu embassies for the BJP's informal international diplomacy, with the United Arab Emirates' temple in 2018, and another coming soon to the US in the form of Akshardham New Jersey. The BAPS guru incarnates the imagination of a purely Hindu India that, in turn, legitimizes the Prime Minister as a righteous and detached Hindu leader.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Blessings and Prayers for PM Narendra Modi from HH Mahant Swami Maharaj, Nadiad, India," BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, Swaminarayan Aksharpith, May 23, 2019, <https://www.baps.org/News/2019/Blessings-and-Prayers-for-PM-Narendra-Modi-from-HH-Mahant-Swami-Maharaj-16724.aspx>.

<sup>2</sup> For a classic study of this phenomenon, see Lise McKean, *Divine Enterprise: Gurus and the Hindu Nationalist Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

As the BJP reimagines the Indian state into a sacral Hindu Rashtra, the mass visibility of newly constructed Hindu temples becomes a core government function, in which BAPS is expanding its role. More than the demographic overlap of BAPS satsaṅgis and BJP supporters in Gujarat, the institution has also made official endorsements of contemporary Hindutva's political hobbyhorse, constructing a Hindu temple at the site of Rāma's birthplace. Capitalizing on the historic popularity of the televised *Ramayana* serial, the BJP and L.K. Advani led the "Ram Janmabhumi" (birthplace) campaign to tear down the Barbari Masjid, allegedly located atop the site of Rāma's birth, and replace it with a Hindu temple.<sup>3</sup> A Hindutva mob eventually tore down the Masjid in December of 1992, and Hindutva volunteers have taken pilgrimages to the site ever since. In the early 1990s, BAPS contributed supplies for the Hindutva activists working to build the Hindu temple in Ayodhya.<sup>4</sup> The 2002 Gujarati pogroms were ignited when a train car full of these Ayodhya volunteers exploded at the station in Ghodra, Gujarat, killing 58.<sup>5</sup> As mentioned in Chapter 3, the BAPS Akshardham temple complex in Gandhinagar was attacked later that year in retaliation for the anti-Muslim violence. Then in 2021, after the Indian Supreme Court cleared the way for the Hindu temple's construction, BAPS became a financial supporter of the temple construction effort. BAPS announced its donation of Ru. 2,11,11,111 (roughly \$281,600) for the temple at an event with Gujarat's BJP Chief Minister, Vijay Rupani.<sup>6</sup> In this way, BAPS' institutional fixation on spectacular temple construction has translated into material support of the BJP's political objectives.

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<sup>3</sup> Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics After Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Hanna Kim, "Being Swaminarayan: The Ontology and Significance of Belief in the Construction of a Gujarati Diaspora," PhD diss., (Columbia University, 2001), 40—41.

<sup>5</sup> Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi, *Pogrom in Gujarat: Hindu Nationalism and Anti-Muslim Violence in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> "BAPS Donates for the Ram Janmabhumi Mandir, Ahmedabad, India," BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, Swaminarayan Aksharpith, February 13, 2021, <https://www.baps.org/News/2021/BAPS-Donates-for-the-Ram-Janmabhumi-Mandir-19618.aspx>.

While the BJP's Islamophobia rightly receives the bulk of academic and journalistic scrutiny, another of its core political aims is the denial of caste hierarchy to undermine India's reservation system. In addition to the *Ramayana* serial and Janmabhumi campaign, the contemporary BJP's ascent to power was also fueled by upper-caste outrage against the Mandal Commission.<sup>7</sup> In 1980, the Mandal Commission recommended an affirmative action policy in which 27% of Indian government jobs would be reserved for people of low, or "Other Backwards Castes." When Mandal's reservation system was implemented in 1990, it was met with massive, brahmin-led protests. The BJP capitalized on this aggrievement and began advocating for government jobs and resources to be distributed along lines of *religious* identity, rather than caste. At the same time, BAPS organizes sevā for mass events in the name of "Hindu unity" and the "protection of Hindu Dharma," both Hindu political slogans. The BJP invokes pan-Hindu unity to paper over conflict between high- and low-caste Hindus. Recent scholarship has shown the very identification of Dalit religion as Hindu to be historically recent and in the service of this majoritarian Hindu political agenda.<sup>8</sup> BAPS' representation of pan-Indian, unified Hinduism, as in its *Mystic India* IMAX film, reinforces the BJP's elision of caste-based discrimination.

Nevertheless, the future of transnational BAPS' alignment with the BJP may be shifting in this political moment. The outsized influence of the American diaspora in particular raises questions on the future of critical caste consciousness among South Asian Americans. The history of the American Indian diaspora has often shown that anti-Dalit discrimination is reinscribed, if not worsened, outside of India. Many Americans are unaware of caste-based discrimination in the US, and until now the South Asian American community has regularly denied its reality. A recent

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<sup>7</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot, *Religion, Caste, and Politics in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Joel Lee, *Deceptive Majority: Dalits, Hinduism, and Underground Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

survey found that 67% of Dalits in the United States experience discrimination in the workplace because of their caste.<sup>9</sup> Still, the 90% of the American diaspora composed of middle- and upper-caste Indians often assumes that caste-discrimination simply does not occur in the US.<sup>10</sup> However, the movement for Black Lives, efforts for police reform, solidarity with undocumented immigrants, and a resurgent American Labor movement have fostered a new popular coalition advocating justice for poor, marginalized, and oppressed communities. To this list of political priorities, some in the South Asian American diaspora would add justice for Dalit oppression.

Low-caste identity is not a protected legal category under US law, but a recent lawsuit in California seeks to change that. In 2020, the State of California filed suit against Cisco Systems, Inc., alleging work-place discrimination and civil rights violations against its low-caste, Dalit employees. The suit asks the court to include caste identity under civil rights protections, because caste, they argue, “includes religion, ancestry, national origin/ethnicity, and race/color.”<sup>11</sup> Plaintiffs say they were expected to abide caste hierarchy in the California workplace, enforced by brahmin supervisors, who retaliated against low-caste employees when they raised complaints. The case filing brought special attention to the persistence of caste-based oppression in the US, and especially in Silicon Valley.

Supposedly meritocratic institutions, especially in prestigious and competitive fields like digital technology, may be some of the worst offenders of American caste abuse. Ajantha Subramanian’s *The Caste of Merit* argues that the prestigious Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) mask a new consolidation of high-caste privilege with its hyper-competitive admissions

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<sup>9</sup> M. Zwick-Maitreyi, T. Soundararajan, N. Dar, R.F. Bheel, and P. Balakrishnan, “Caste in the United States: A Survey of Caste Among South Asian Americans,” Equality Labs, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> California Department of Fair Employment and Housing, an agency of the State of California v. Cisco Systems Inc., a California Corporation; Sundar Iyer, an individual; Ramana Kompella, an individual, Demand for Jury Trial at 3 (Nor. Cal. June 30, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> *California v. Cisco*, at 16 (2020).

process as a myth of impartial meritocracy.<sup>12</sup> As India’s premier engineering institutions, the IITs are exempt from affirmative-action reservations for low-caste students. IIT grads are considered the best of the best and just happen to be overwhelmingly from high-caste backgrounds. IIT alumni are also over-represented among the engineers in Silicon Valley, including the Cisco lawsuit. The Plaintiff alleges that his brahmin supervisor at Cisco knew of his caste background and outed him to coworkers because the two were acquainted when they attended IIT at the same time.<sup>13</sup> The tech industry’s H1-B visas and transmigration of specialist workers can serve to reproduce high-caste privilege in the United States.

What role will BAPS play in the future of low-caste Americans? Could Patel’s Twitter include caste justice in his American activism? The BAPS community may be at an inflection point on that very question. A class-action lawsuit filed against BAPS in May 2021 alleged caste discrimination and criminally low wages for their construction workers at their Akshardham temple complex in New Jersey. Six of the Dalit workers alleged that the men were confined to temple grounds, where they slept in trailers and worked twelve-and-a-half shifts for roughly \$1.20 per hour.<sup>14</sup> Spokespersons for BAPS disputed the men’s claims, saying they were “naturally shaken” by the allegations, but believed “when the full facts come out, we will be able to provide answers and show that these accusations and allegations are without merit.”<sup>15</sup> Whether these Dalit workers’ claims are granted merit or not, the case prompts reflection on the organization’s distribution of labor and the role of sevā in American Hinduism.

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<sup>12</sup> Ajantha Subramanian, *The Caste of Merit: Engineering Education in India* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019).

<sup>13</sup> *California v. Cisco*, at 8 (2020).

<sup>14</sup> Mukesh Kumar, Keshav Kumar, Devi Laal, Niranjana, Pappu, and Brajendra on behalf of themselves and all others similarly situated v. Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha, Inc., BAPS Mercer LLC, BAPS Robbinsville LLC, BAPS Fellowship Services, Inc., Bharat Doe a/k/a Bharat Bhai, Pankaj Patel, Kanu Patel, and Swami Prasanand, 3:21-cv-11048 at 14 (N.J. May 5, 2021).

<sup>15</sup> Annie Correal, “Hindu Sect Is Accused of Using Forced Labor to Build New Jersey Temple,” *New York Times*, May 11, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/11/nyregion/nj-hindu-temple-india-baps.html>.

Some of the workers' allegations hinge on BAPS' deployment of sevā and its relation to contracted labor. The men say they travelled to the US on R-1 visas, which are used for religious workers, such as priests and missionaries. However, their complaint says, "nearly all [of the workers] were not members of Defendant's denomination,"<sup>16</sup> and they, "did not work as ministers or in a religious vocation or occupation in New Jersey. Instead, they performed manual labor."<sup>17</sup> Interpreting sevā as religious vocation may not be true to sevā's medieval bhakti formulation or its earlier Sanskritic origins, but it certainly suits the contemporary transnational language of BAPS. Devotees often translate sevā as "volunteering," as discussed in Chapter 3, and some life-long sevaks describe their work as a "calling," like Vikram in Chapter 5. In contrast, the New Jersey complaint repeatedly states, "[i]n no manner were Plaintiffs [...] volunteers."<sup>18</sup> According to the complaint, these men were neither recruited as devotional volunteers nor motivated by religious commitments. Instead, they were contracted laborers who worked in exchange for monetary compensation. BAPS' categorization of sevā can blur distinctions of volunteering and employment, but it may also have the power to reshape American Hindu labor relations.

Perhaps this case will become a watershed moment, and perhaps not. The case could be buried under years of lengthy, inconclusive litigation or quiet, out-of-court settlements. These allegations could be proven, withdrawn, or discredited. Writing in the early days of a controversy that will likely take years to unfold, I can only raise questions as to how BAPS and American Hinduism generally will respond to this moment. Will this case galvanize support for low-caste status to become a protected legal category under US law? Will this become another polarizing event that separates Hindutva-sympathizers from low-caste advocates? Will the discourse devolve

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<sup>16</sup> *Kumar v. BAPS*, at 2 (2021).

<sup>17</sup> *Kumar v. BAPS*, at 14 (2021).

<sup>18</sup> *Kumar v. BAPS*, at 19 (2021).

into another round of accusations of “Hinduphobia” against BAPS’ critics? In 2021, Patel’s Twitter remained quiet on the Akshardham case, but other initial reactions quickly reiterated these familiar tropes. Still, I want to mark another potential here: chipping away at the caste-blind Hindu unity championed by Hindutva’s (most often brahmin) spokespersons could unsettle or recenter the BJP’s transnational political coalition. If the current generation of American Hindus embrace the movement for caste liberation alongside that for black lives and undocumented immigrants, there could be a new moment of reckoning in the transnational Hindu world.

This moment contains a liberatory potential that could realign both Svāminārāyaṇ and general Hindu politics of caste relations in the American diaspora. Over the late-twentieth and early-twenty first centuries, transnational Hinduism engendered widespread support for Hindu Nationalism, but this alignment is by no means inevitable. The legal, political, and spiritual contingencies of the present point to possible, alternative futures. A new deployment of sevā has the potential to remake Hindu divisions of labor into a more equitable distribution of power, and caste justice could undo some of Hindu Nationalism’s sway in the Western diaspora. BAPS’ sevā could be used to raise American consciousness of Dalit oppression, promote legal protections for low-caste workers, and decouple the most prominent American Hindu institution from Modi’s Hindutva.

To name this liberatory potential is not to say it is expected, hopeful, or even likely. The institutionalized sevā of this moment also holds the potential for abuse and a re-entrenchment of caste-based oppression. My point here is only to say that the BAPS institution of media sevā is not an air-tight system of seamless self-reproduction. Every new project undertaken by BAPS brings unpredictable consequences. New mass mediations do not simply convey the guru’s teaching but alter it and reshape his spiritual presence in the process. BAPS’ standardized education on

Sahajānand Svāmī does not transparently transmit knowledge of his life but remakes and reinterprets him for new audiences. The rise of BAPS has not merely spread Shastriji's Akshar Purushottam group but transformed it into a new, centralized transnational institution. Just so, the organization's third Akshardham temple in New Jersey brings a new potential to remake the American institution's approach to sevā and caste and its association with the BJP. Only future research will tell what comes of this potential.

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