

Sect Culture and Social Service: The Case of Bochasanwasi Shree Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha

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Abstract

This article is based on fieldwork with a branch of the popular Hindu sect, the Swaminarayan, in Gujarat, India. The branch is called the Bochasanwasi Shree Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS). It has spread throughout the world. I examine its cultural nuances and its *seva*, that is, its social service and outreach work. *Seva* implements the mandate for, and ideology of, social service and entails aspects of volition and institutionalized service. My aim has been to see how the sect culture, which is essentially inward-bonding, undertakes *seva* within the larger, beneficiary populace. I argue that two aspects of BAPS's *seva* are prominent and peculiar to it, namely, perpetuating sect culture and remembrance of the spiritual heads. I propose that *seva* is a practice of BAPS to enable sect proliferation and create a space for itself in the civil society.

Keywords

sect, social service, *seva*, Swaminarayan, BAPS

Introduction

Sects may be explored through their texts, origins, or myths, ritual, hagiographies, and norms and forms of praxis (Houtart & Lemercinier, 1984). Sociologists Stark and Bainbridge (1980, 1981a, 1981b) state that sects claim to be refurbished versions of the faith from which they split. Wallis (1975) argues that sects are characterized by “epistemological authoritarianism” (p. 132) and claim to possess unique and privileged access to the truth or salvation, and that “their committed adherents typically regard all those outside the confines of the collectivity as ‘in error’.” (p. 133) In the Hindu context, the term *sect* denotes not only a separated group but also an organized tradition, usually one established by the founder of the original group. Although there are conceptual problems in superimposing the evangelical term *sect* in the Hindu context (Williams, 1984, 2001), a close parallel can be drawn with the term *sampradaya*, that is, a tradition or religious system relating to a succession of masters and disciples that serves as a spiritual channel. I argue that the Swaminarayan *sampradaya* is a body of modified Vaishnavite¹ Hindu practices, views, and attitudes that are transmitted, redefined, and reviewed by each successive generation of followers. Participation in a *sampradaya* promotes continuity with the past, or tradition, but it also provides a platform for change through modified practices. These practices may entail social outreach such as *seva* (social service), reaching those beyond traditional social security nets. Very often, such efforts are not purely social but are also

geared toward proselytizing. Hence, it can be said that such “social outreach” is further intertwined with matters of gender, caste/race, class and ethnicity, and, further, domains of “power,” “contradictions,” and “communalism.”

The social service work of such sects, in the contemporary times, can be situated in the broader theoretical framework of religion, neoliberalization, and development. As instrumental forms of religion in the neoliberal regime, faith-based institutions promote an alternate vision of development (Jones & Petersen, 2011). There is in fact a sacred public-private partnership or a form of governmentality, where the state, in wake of neoliberalism, borrows from or harnesses the resources of these faith-based institutions, to fulfill governmental ends of social welfare provision (Copeman & Ikegame, 2012; Ikegame, 2012). Faith-based institutions, however, draw on this opportunity, as it simultaneously serves the purpose of visibility and legitimacy and also divesting themselves from taxes (as social service activities provide tax exemption to institutions; Warrior, 2003).

This article is based on fieldwork that I conducted in the summer 2012 with the Swaminarayan *sampradaya*, a popular

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Hindu sect in India, a branch of which is formally named Bochasanwasi Shree Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha, and less formally, BAPS.² I propose that *seva*, or social service of the sect, is a strategy to simultaneously reach out to a larger beneficiary populace and impress upon the social milieu its own culture, ideology, and remembrance of the spiritual heads as epitomes of virtue. The Swaminarayan sect was founded in the early 19th century, and the BAPS was founded in the early 20th century. In addition to BAPS, currently there are other branches of Swaminarayan under its umbrella tradition. The sect's founder, Lord Swaminarayan, was born in Chhapia, Uttar Pradesh, India, in 1781. Prompted by spiritual yearnings, he left home to wander, eventually arriving at Loj in Saurashtra, India, at the ashram of Ramanand Swami (a proponent of the non-dualist school of Indian philosophy), where he endeavored to establish a sect. During his lifetime, owing to his clairvoyance and premonitions, Swaminarayan was venerated as the Godhead.³ He propagated the *Navya Vishishtadvaita* philosophy⁴ and the *Saguna* form of Vaishnavite worship.⁵ Hence, in the traditional images of the deity, Krishna, he urged devotees to see images of his own self as the truly realized one. Sect formation and foundation of the institution based on it are attributed to Swaminarayan's disciple and spiritual successor, Gunatitanand Swami, and later, a householder initiated into asceticism known as Mahant Pragji Bhagat. This involvement by a person of a lower caste initially sparked a caste-based schism within the early followers of the sect, but this was resolved later through an untold divine realization experienced by the Pragji Bhagat, which then led to the idea of establishment of the branch known as BAPS. Formally, it was registered during the headship of Shastriji Maharaj in 1907. There has since been a passing on of spiritual succession, with Lord Swaminarayan being the accepted Purushottam, and the subsequent spiritual leaders as Akshar, through whom Lord Swaminarayan continues to persist. The current spiritual head is Pramukh Swami and the next successor is Mahant Swami.

Since its inception, BAPS has expanded from the native Bochasan and temple consecration drive to a global organization with a mandate to provide "social and spiritual care" (Swayamprakashdas Sadhu, 1999). Three distinctive phases in its history can be discerned: first, the initial temple consecration and expansion; second, continuation of temple traditions, construction of temples throughout the world, and acculturation; and third, the global spread and consolidation of BAPS as a "social" and "spiritual" organization (Amrutvijaydas Sadhu, 2007). In the global political economy, BAPS is posited as a religious institution practicing and developing its own ideals both "internally," where state religions apply, and in "propagation mode," where secularization and pluralism permit. The spread of BAPS centers has also been to places that have been settled by the diaspora Gujarati community (Dwyer, 2004; Srivastava, 2009). In the Indian context, BAPS has historically posited itself as a sectarian institution with "social" and

"accommodative" leanings, maintaining a tone of harmony, exchange, prescription, and ascription. Currently, its social and spiritual work occurs within the Gujarat state prescriptions and rules, with BAPS seeking professional assistance in all its activities. The interface with civil society is threefold, through *parshads* and sadhus, householder adherents who have a history of a patronage relationship with the spiritual leaders, and beneficiary groups that consist of adherents and non-adherents or the general populace.

There is a certain brand-building and maintenance of BAPS as an organization that provides "social and spiritual care." Commodification is evident in its range of salvation goods: books, pamphlets, audiovisual devotional materials, diaries, and calendars. These are the work of Swaminarayan Aksharpathi, the publications unit of BAPS. The BAPS website, developed in 1999, is like a global connection point for adherents worldwide, with regular postings from the scriptures, daily thoughts, aphorisms, and updates. The term *commodification* aptly describes the contemporary stand of BAPS as a sectarian organization that bases its expansion on marketable salvation goods, an online presence, and connections with the virtual adherent commune. Religious and devotional material is sold to devotees with the purpose of cultivating religiosity and ensuring that it perpetuates through the continuous contact with various material forms. Routinization is a necessary outcome of sectarianism, and BAPS adherents are staunch in their belief system, a BAPS-modified version of Vaishnavism (Burghart, 1987). This loyalty permeates all realms of existence, including material exchange, such as by tithing, philanthropy, and the sharing of profits with kith and kin.

Some of the earlier transnational ethnographic studies on BAPS in the United Kingdom and the diaspora in general have been done by Knott (1986), Burghart (1987), Jackson and Nesbitt (1993), Nye (1995), and Vertovec (2000). Williams (2001) and A. M. Shah (2006) have presented a sociological and historiographical analysis of sect development in India. Furthermore, Kim (2009) has shown how BAPS engages the public through various means, including the highly visible mode of temple construction. These studies have provided rich ethnographic accounts of BAPS and its development in India and the diaspora.

Angela Rudert (2004) in particular has examined *seva* as a form of exchange and as a means of creating social capital for the BAPS. Rudert's key focus was on gender roles within the BAPS, particularly the ways in which women negotiate power. According to Rudert (2004), women undertake their own initiatives and form their own spaces. For Bhatt (2000), Mukta (2000), and Shukla (1997, 2003), BAPS's efforts to showcase and promote Hinduism as a distinct religion with clear geographic location and doctrines are indicative of its *Hindutva* affinities. These scholars, and others, who have analyzed the intersection of the South Asian diaspora and some of its members' attraction to religious nationalist agendas, have argued that BAPS, owing to its financial

strength and Gujarati membership, is attempting to “hegemonize the space of Hindu representation in the UK” (Bhatt, 2000, p. 588).

In this article, I thus focus on BAPS as an important branch of Swaminarayan Hinduism or as a sect⁶ that has perpetuated sect culture and evoked memories of the spiritual heads while performing *seva*. Other than Rudert’s study, this aspect of BAPS’s *seva* has not captured the attention of researchers. BAPS thrives on the energies of its followers, and BAPS has gained popularity among even non-followers due to its large-scale *seva* activities. Memories of the Swaminarayan lineage and philosophy are an inherent part of the way *seva* unfolds. This is reflected in guru remembrance in every aspect of transactions and in all *seva*. This is further bolstered by strong sectarian sentiments and reverence to Pramukh Swami, the head, and Mahant Swami, the next in charge, who urge followers to keep the tradition alive.

Data and Methods

My fieldwork was undertaken with the BAPS branch. As the BAPS branch is one of the leading and popular branches within the gamut of the Swaminarayan sect or *sampradaya*, it is also sometimes considered emblematic of the main *sampradaya* in popular discourses. I undertook the field work in the branch’s headquarters at Shahibaug, Ahmedabad, India, and specifically its social project work in Gujarat through nonparticipant observation, key informant interviews, and analysis of organizational literature, particularly BAPS’s main texts, the *Shikshapatri* and the *Vachanamrutam*. I also consulted other organizational literature, including interpretative works by members of the order. Key informants were the sadhus (ascetics). A peculiarity of BAPS is that the male ascetics refrain from conversing directly with women as that is believed to interfere with their vows of chastity. Hence, I wrote my questions (in Gujarati) for the three sadhus and the one *parshad* whom I questioned, and they, in turn, answered in writing. However, I conducted face-to-face interviews with the two women workers at the Shahibaug headquarters, that is, office-bearers of the women’s wing of BAPS, whom I questioned. These women had voluntarily chosen to remain single and dedicate their lives to BAPS work. Asceticism, however, is not binding on women of the sect.

I asked questions, obtained answers, and made translations and interpretations in the context of a dialogical relationship with my informants. I had to and fro written conversations with the male informants. With the female informants, I was able to go back to check their responses and confirm whether my notes were appropriate. My familiarity with the Gujarati language enabled me to build an easy rapport with the women followers, and I was able to reconnect with them through either phone or face-to-face meetings to revalidate the data obtained from them and to factually cross-check the written material I had obtained from the sadhus. The cross-check resulted in the sadhus ratifying my facts and data through

written notes, and no major changes were suggested. Moreover, because the theme of the inquiry was *seva* or service, there were no major dissensions between the views of the sadhus, *parshads*, and female informants. Furthermore, the female informants, as conscious bridges between me and the sadhus and *parshads* (though they were also not allowed direct access or contact), introduced me to the ways of connecting with them and the proper channels to ensure that the communication reaches the concerned person.

In terms of nonparticipant observation, I entered the BAPS geographical space (the headquarters and various social projects) to observe events, activities, and interactions with the aim of gaining a direct understanding of their modes of exchange and interaction in their natural context. Although I did not actually do *seva*, I was able to write notes on my observations of social interactions. The aspect of not actually doing was more a norm than a matter of choice, because BAPS community requires a membership to actually engage. This nonparticipant distance also enabled me to have an unbiased view of *seva* activities. Though as a traditional technique nonparticipation may invite bias from the researcher, in the context of BAPS’s essentially sectarian ethos, it gave a sense of space and distance. Even with women, instead of participating in *seva*, which women do as extensively as their male counterparts (Rudert, 2004), I engaged in terms of going along with, or being around, them rather than actually doing *seva*. Women “talked while doing” and “demonstrated.” All of this was done while observing their watershed project⁷ and their earthquake reconstruction project.⁸

The core proposition is that for BAPS, social service is a means to build a public image and simultaneously proliferate a sect culture. In my analysis, the focus is thus the synergy that arises between and through the faith orientation and social outreach in BAPS. To build into my key argument that BAPS deploys *seva* or social service as a means of gaining space in the larger society, possibly more followers in its fold and remember the guru lineage, the following sections of the article are organized thus. I first discuss the vision of BAPS in terms of its views on social stratification, social ethics, social service, and social transformation. I then discuss the aspect of practice of *seva* through three themes—volition, institutionalized social service, and sect proliferation and creating memories. Through this discussion, I build a case for how BAPS’s *seva* is a way to perpetuate its culture, evoke memories or remembrances of the spiritual heads, and negotiate spaces for itself in the larger civil society. *Seva* becomes a way for this faith-based organization to project itself as an actor in the larger social welfare domain. There are, however, some contradictions inherent in this process, which have also been discussed.

Vision

BAPS’s vision can be discussed through its views on social stratification, social ethics, social service, and social transformation.

Views on Social Stratification

In the BAPS, stratification has assumed a new form. New center–margin hierarchies have arisen according to degrees of proximity to the spiritual leaders who are at the top of the hierarchy. Bourgeois householder adherents form the next level. One coterie comprises those associated historically through family allegiance (families aligned to succeeding leaders of BAPS through various temples across Gujarat) and belonging to the Kanbi-Patidar and Thakkar lineage (members of these castes comprise the flourishing trade community of Gujarat; Breman, 1974; Pocock, 1972; G. Shah & Rutten, 2003). The second comprises those of similar caste origin and live in countries across the globe where BAPS has a presence. With the rejection of traditional caste hierarchies, class, and duration and source of adherence have become the new bases for power and status in BAPS (A. M. Shah, 2006).

Apart from class and caste, gender is negotiated through various means, including first, privileged segregation, by which men and women have designated areas in BAPS operations; second, benevolent separation, by which women have designated places of exchange remote from sadhus; third, accommodation within religious discourse—women are permitted to study and teach scriptures; fourth, widowhood, by which women are endowed with the affirmative status of *samkhyayogini* (H. T. Dave, 2000); and fifth, the “consolation of salvation,” by which the prerogative of salvation otherwise limited in Hindu discourse to males is made available to women through the social arrangements named above. However, women do not have a privileged position because BAPS social construction is patriarchal, albeit benevolently so.

Within the complex language of sectarian class-ification, caste-ification, and gender, social ethics assume a new grammar. There is altruism within and beyond boundaries defined by BAPS. Whereas members of the order or sadhus extend spiritual altruism to householders in general, tangible *seva*, philanthropy, and altruism are qualities of a householder in the BAPS. According to a senior sadhu,

... mainly in terms of ethics, we believe in doing good for all. Our sadhus are completely committed to the cause and hence do everything as their duty. For our householders, depending on resources and time, they contribute. They work or offer *seva* at two levels—one to the less privileged members within our sampradaya and the other to all members of society irrespective of caste, creed and race. Whoever comes to the Swaminarayan fold and to BAPS is served. (Ahmedabad: April 2012)

On Social Issues, Social Service, and Social Transformation

In a traditional sense, BAPS has a structural position on macro social issues: Poverty, inequality, and diminished access to resources are considered to be outcomes of structural arrangements. According to a woman office-bearer,

Historically our society is arranged in such a way that some people have all the resources whereas others do not have access. One of the reasons for this difference in access is the ascribed or birth status of the individual. The second is the rigidity in our society which does not permit too much upward mobility. (Ahmedabad: March 2012)

The Swaminarayan sect is then viewed as a liberating mechanism from this structural entrapment: It accommodates all who believe in its tenets (similar to Brahminization and Sanskritization).⁹ This is done by two modes: by deriving material advantage from BAPS affiliation through its educational and health services and by the spiritual elevation of all adherents through prescribed family rites and rituals. According to a woman office-bearer,

Whoever believes in the Swaminarayan dharma has a prescribed set of household practices—ghar sabha, samuha bhojan and ghar mandir—apart from the Sunday assemblies held at the local BAPS temple. When they follow these they automatically receive Lord Swaminarayan’s grace and get promoted to a higher realm of existence. (Ahmedabad: March 2012)

Norms for action, service, and work are in keeping with the sentiments of altruism prescribed in the Hindu scriptures (Jnaneshwardas Sadhu & Mukundcharandas Sadhu, 2001). According to a senior sadhu,

BAPS believes that for those who give and serve, the foremost sentiment should be that one is fortunate to be able to do so. Pramukh Swami also says that it should be kept a secret, i.e., not too much noise should be made about it and one should have no expectations in return for the service and giving. Also it is important to exercise discretion in terms of to whom one should donate. BAPS has a systematic social service wing and several departments to look into its various projects, such as: health, residential institutions, educational institutions, ecological projects and disaster interventions. They can provide a need assessment database which can be a determinant for directing giving and volunteering there. The main aspect should be the sentiment that everything belongs to the Almighty and one should work and give with that spirit. (Ahmedabad: May 2012)

The rationale for action, service, and work by BAPS is to comprehend the “meaning of life” (Paramananddas Sadhu, 1998), to understand the path to the divine (Akshharjivandas Sadhu, 1997), and to restore peace in society. One of the distinctive but not popularly known practices in this service/work mandate is for a BAPS family fraternity to “offer” one child of the family/household for BAPS congregational service, specifically in its religio-spiritual and social activities. This has an ecumenical feel, the motivation being twofold: to obtain human resources to ensure continuity and propagation of the fellowship and more peculiarly, for BAPS to have a firm patron base from the families of those who have made their vows. According to a woman office-bearer,

... there is an almost unspoken rule. For those who are staunch believers of the Swaminarayan religion: offer one child from their family to the service of Akshar Purushottam. That way they show their devotion to Lord Swaminarayan and loyalty to BAPS. (Ahmedabad: March 2012)

This was corroborated by the three sadhus I interviewed. Further in the course syllabi of the *satsang* examinations, this aspect finds a mention in the sections on practice.

BAPS's vision of social transformation entails several features: first, harnessing youth potential by engaging them in the higher socio-spiritual care endeavor of BAPS (R. M. Dave, 1977); second, philanthropy as "giving in the service of God," ensuring, in a utilitarian sense, the greatest good; and third, the culture of "giving." Transformation in BAPS also entails, fourth, identifying the "other" who is in need of "joy, goodness and progress," with BAPS adherents believed to be having the ability to serve others for the common good. According to a sadhu,

... we can never be happy by making others miserable. If we really want societal change then we must know that in the joy of others lies our own, in the good of others abides our own and in the progress of others rests our own. (Ahmedabad: May 2012)

Moreover, transformation entails, fifth, the penetrating ideal of "familism"—*vasudhaiva kutumbakam*, which proposes the equality of all. The affirmation and internalization of this ideal by BAPS adherents are believed to be instrumental in transformation. Finally, the pathway to transformation (both personal and social) for BAPS adherents is, sixth, worship of Akshar Brahman,¹⁰ abiding by prescribed moral laws, and intoning the Swaminarayan mantra. According to a woman office-bearer,

In one question-answer session, Pramukh Swami Maharaj has proposed that the future will be good if one worships Lord Swaminarayan and Gunatitanand Swami and obeys their commands. Also moral and spiritual living means, according to Pramukh Swami, a residence in the Satayuga. Finally reciting the Swaminarayan mantra always as "Jai Swaminarayan" is the key to change as it has cosmic influences. (Ahmedabad: March 2012)

Essentially, within the BAPS sociology and specifically the followers or *satsangis*,¹¹ social service is a way to connect with the order and execute its ideals in daily living. One's own family is considered as the starting point for change. According to a woman office-bearer,

BAPS ideals are such that if one follows them it can be possible to do away with violence at all levels and peace can be restored. Lord Swaminarayan and the subsequent swamis have interpreted the Hindu scriptures for us in such a way that it contains answers to all social and global problems. One of the most important teachings is that, for national and world peace, the starting point is the family. If there is peace in the family, then automatically

there will be peace in the society and the world. For that we have the parampara of ghar satsang, samuha bhojan and ghar mandir. Norms and practices have been laid down for everyone—ascetics, householders, women, children, youth and widows. If everyone follows them, then there will be peace at the individual level. When there is peace at the individual level then there will be peace in society and the world. (Ahmedabad: July 2012)

Practice: Seva or Social Service in BAPS

BAPS operates on text prescriptions for social service: principled living, asceticism, service, surrender, camaraderie, and virtues (Balpravrutti Madhyastha Karyalaya, 2011; Nye, 1995). *Seva* is a part of *sadhana*. According to a senior sadhu,

As there is no collective endeavour to seek God, since he is there for us, the sadhana involves realising the personal God manifesting through Pramukh Swami Maharaj. This requires the aspirant to strive for offering unalloyed devotion to the realised person, Pramukh Swami in this case, seva or service and partnering in initiatives under his guidance, being one path. (Ahmedabad: June 2012)

History reports instances of serendipitous involvement of the founders in service activities, but systematized initiatives commenced only in 1971, under the guidance of the current spiritual head. Thus, there are stories of Lord Swaminarayan who voluntarily participated in the 1813 Kathiawad famine relief work and environmental restoration work (H. T. Dave, 2000; Mukundcharandas Sadhu, 1999). The systematic activities of social service begun in 1971 bear the overarching ideology of "bijana sukhma aapnu sukh" and the mandate of philanthropy, service, and altruism with the BAPS ideational-normative frame, which combines social and spiritual care.¹² According to a senior sadhu,

Through the Swaminarayan dharma which is based on sanatana Vedic ideals, our services and activities are planned. Our main aim is social and spiritual upliftment of all. For that we have religious activities, spiritual services and social services. Our religious activities include scriptural study and temple consecrations globally. Our spiritual services are the study groups where spiritual education is imparted, the satsang examinations where grades are established and the Sunday assemblies where congregational spirit is inculcated. Our social services are the range of health, education, disaster intervention and ecological projects which BAPS undertakes under the spiritual guidance of Pramukh Swami. The distinctiveness of BAPS endeavours is evident because of Swamiji's spiritual perspective and vision which backs it, and Lord Swaminarayan's grace which is proliferated. (Ahmedabad: May 2012)

Three prominent themes emerge in terms of *seva* or service in BAPS—volition, institutionalized social service, and sect proliferation and creating memories. Volition is the voluntary spirit in doers of social service, which prompts them to engage. Institutionalized social services are

established projects where adherents participate along with staff and office-bearers. Service then becomes a means of proliferating the sect and creating memories or remembrances of the guru lineage. All these aspects add to the complex construct of BAPS's *seva* sentiment and praxis, as I discuss in detail.

Volition and Its Development

What emerges voluntarily from within is belief in the BAPS philosophy—accepting Swaminarayan as the God and Pramukh Swami as his manifest abode. Service then flows out of this contention. According to a *parshad*,

Seva is originated from our firm belief in Pramukh Swami. His ideals guide us—we are a part of the Swaminarayan faith because we want to be. The rest, all—whether it is temple consecration, donation, or participating in social service activities, it just flows from there. (Ahmedabad, May 2012)

Precepts or formal prescriptions characteristic of BAPS nevertheless exist. There are differences in requirements for ascetics, householders, and women. For ascetics, abiding by norms and forms of BAPS's functioning is mandatory. These are laid down at the time of initiation into the *parshad* fold and reinforced at the time of perpetual vows. Alignment with the twin mandate of social and spiritual care is required. Another aspect is that of “village vicharan,” which is to be undertaken by the ascetics and refers to traveling to villages to speak to the people about BAPS, conduct discourses, understand needs, and suggest new social initiatives on the basis of felt and perceived needs. According to a senior sadhu,

Sadhu vicharan, which has been a norm since the time of Lord Swaminarayan, is responsible for the starting of several social initiatives such as hostels and mobile dispensaries in the rural areas. (Ahmedabad: May 2012)

For householders, by contrast, there are suggestive prescriptions. For instance, Verse 147 of the *Shikshapatri* prescribes that

householder devotees should donate one-tenth of their income or of their agricultural products to the sanstha. Those who are not so well off could donate one-twentieth part. Such donations purify one's wealth. Profits and products which are not shared in such a manner may corrupt the possessor and his virtues are diminished. (Ahmedabad: May 2012)

Similarly, the *Shikshapatri* mentions *seva* by householders and women as being desirable and *dana* as the foremost virtue. *Seva* is supposed to give “inner peace” and facilitate the attainment of *Akshardham*. According to a woman office-bearer,

We also have a karyakar margadarshika, which describes the principles that we must adhere to while performing seva. This includes willingness to work, ethics in work, systematisation and care in work, work by understanding the glory of God and surrender to Him. (Ahmedabad: May 2012)

There are also certain mandatory elements for householders and ascetics that build into defining the service spirit. For householders, BAPS group participation is an unspoken mandate for participating in the mission and its multifarious activities. These groups are co-ordinated by monastics or senior devotees dedicated to BAPS who have gone through the rites of passage—in this case, through having been members of such groups or of weekly assemblies. Furthermore, BAPS has departments to centrally co-ordinate such groups worldwide, and they regularly produce guidance literature, manuals, activity sets, and program flyers for regulating group functioning. According to a senior sadhu,

For a general Swaminarayan adherent it is like a religious organisation with certain philosophies. But for the true adherent, the real face of BAPS as an organisation undertaking both social and spiritual activities, the understanding comes from being a part of its range of enculturation activities. In all these groups, the main objective is to teach the philosophy of BAPS and the approach of the sanstha to its social activities where they can then be sevaks, or karyakars. These groups, which have now started in almost all centres of BAPS, serve the purpose of cadre and loyalty building for BAPS. People develop attachment with BAPS and understand the true nature of its activities. Further they build camaraderie among themselves. This goes a long way in sustaining the organisation and its various activities. They have a certain feeling of security—a spiritual security of the definitiveness of Pramukh Swami's grace. Because it is he who is in favour of such groups—his vision says that such groups go a long way in determining the devotee righteousness and the organisational presence. So we strongly recommend that all people who really wish to follow the Swaminarayan dharma must be a part of groups. Everything is arranged here in such a way that the regular routine and work of people is not affected. They only gain more in the process. (Ahmedabad: July 2012)

A second aspect for householders is the *satsang* examinations, which consist of a nine-level religious course. Most serious adherents undertake a few levels of examination and those who complete all the levels have the option of joining the renunciant fold. According to a woman office-bearer,

Bal satsang examinations for children are undertaken at the behest of the parents of the children who may be keen to initiate their children into the Swaminarayan fold. Thereafter all the other levels are taken by the individuals themselves if they feel the desire to do so. We only propose that if you want to get seriously involved, knowing about the sampradaya and its history, which the satsang syllabus well describes, is important. (Ahmedabad: March 2012)

BAPS followers function as a club in which all members co-operate toward a common goal of salvation. It operates like a company in which clergy employees or sadhus sell salvation products to lay customers—similar to market model approaches (Blasi, 2009). Philanthropy signifies the operationalization of the theoretical construct of “dépense”:¹³ although there is renunciation, there is also prodigality. Members “give up” their worldly goods in exchange for salvation goods. The organization, however, “receives” worldly goods in exchange for the “promise of salvation” or proximity to Akshar Brahman. Hence, even in an act of philanthropy, there is an exchange that fits into domains of rationality. The tithe and philanthropic acts of BAPS adherents are the means for receiving particular rewards (such as proximity to Pramukh Swami and a high position in the sect hierarchy), and such gifts are perceived to be trifling prices to pay for the exalted goods of salvation. The rewards are obviously not of an economic nature: They are non-empirical or semi-empirical compensators, a prominent one being grace of Pramukh Swami.

Institutionalized Social Services

The mission of BAPS’s institutionalized services is the “social care” of those who belong to BAPS and of those who are potential adherents or generally outside the social security nets. The mandate is twofold: service to meet material needs and *satsang* to meet transcendental needs.

Management is systematized in BAPS: The headquarters, which houses the central co-ordination departments for all religio-spiritual activities and service projects, is managed by sadhus and *parshads*. The women’s wing is managed by senior women devotees. The core co-ordination departments are health services, educational services, including schools and student hostels, ecological conservation, the watershed department and disaster relief, rehabilitation, and reconstruction. With the global spread of BAPS, the worldwide umbrella sister organization called BAPS Charities (with major branches in the United States and the United Kingdom) has been founded. It has twin objectives: coordinating projects started by centers worldwide and pooling global resources for social service activities of BAPS in India.

A brief history of institutionalized social welfare and development services of BAPS can be provided thus. In 1987, an educational institution, BAPS Gunatit Vidyamandir, was established in Gunatitnagar, Bhadra. In 1991, the BAPS Swaminarayan Chhatralaya (free hostel for needy students), Nadiad was established followed by three developments in the following year. First, Pramukh Swami Health Services, a division of BAPS, undertook the administration of a hospital in Botad. Second, the Swaminarayan Day School was started in London, and third, BAPS volunteers served during Jamnagar famine. In 1993, services were provided during the Latur earthquake, and in the following year, the BAPS students’ hostel at Mehsana was established. In 1995, the

Mumbai Pramukh Swami Eye Hospital was inaugurated followed by the Pramukh Swami Health Care and Research Centre in the following year. In 1996, BAPS volunteer efforts were also dedicated to cyclone rehab operations in Andhra Pradesh and subsequently during Gujarat floods. Two institutional developments took place in the following year: the Swaminarayan school was established in Nagpur and the Akshardham Centre for Applied Research into Social Harmony was set up in Gandhinagar. In 1998, Swaminarayan students’ hostel was set up in Dhuliya, and in the following year, BAPS mobile dispensaries were launched for tribal populace of Khedbrahma, Pavi Jetpur, and Dharampur. In the same year, relief and rehab operations were undertaken after the Orissa super cyclone (Amrutvijaydas Sadhu, 2007).

The decade from 2000 onward saw several developments. In the first year, there were de-addiction campaigns by BAPS children; inauguration of the Pramukh Swami Hospital in Dabhol; mobile dispensaries in Rajpipla, Dang, Vansda, and Devgadhbharia; the Pramukh Swami Prathamik Aarogya Kendra at Chansad; and the Swaminarayan School for Girls in Karamsad, Saurashtra. One of the most significant and elaborate projects has been the Earthquake relief operations in 2001 including immediate relief, reassurance, rehabilitation, and reconstruction including infrastructure development. In the same year, Pramukh Swami Hospital and Research Centre was started at Atladra near Vadodara, and the Orissa flood relief operations at Jagatsingpur and Krishnapada were undertaken. In 2002, mobile dispensaries were set up for Sankari, Vijaynagar, and Dharampur villages of Kathiawad, and the Pramukh Swami Vidya Mandir and BAPS Swaminarayan Chhatralaya, Sarangpur was set up. Furthermore, schools were also set up in Mount Abu and Silvassa, Atladra, Valsad, and Bakrol. Relief operations were carried out post 2004 tsunami, hurricane Katrina, and Surat floods. Another Pramukh Swami hospital was set up in Surat in 2005 followed by de-addiction campaigns in 2007.

Sect Proliferation and Creating Memories

Sect proliferation by BAPS is by the cultivation of sectarian sentiments through service delivery or *seva*. The uniqueness of Swaminarayan dharma is explained with efforts to build or expand the community. The nuances of faith practices in service delivery that emerge are the “Jay [Jai] Swaminarayan epithet” (Williams, 2001), the starting point for all exchanges, whether with fellows or with the general populace, and *mandals*, which provide the modus operandi for entry and for continuing connection. According to a woman office-bearer,

... for initial rapport building we prefer to start bal mandals or yuvak mandals in areas within our temple premises, which are consecrated first. Through them then other activities are planned. Families form the second unit of our intervention and when projects, such as mobile dispensaries or schools, are launched, then parshads and sadhus of that area keep in regular contact

with the families of the children coming to bal mandals or kishore/kishori mandals to obtain feedback and regular updates. (Ahmedabad: March 2012)

Through this rapport and with the steadfast beneficiary base/capital constructed, the logic of *satsang* and its accompanying gradations are explained and emphasized. This ensures a rootedness in the religio-spiritual discursive realm with BAPS as the fulcrum—the “social and spiritual care” rhetoric firmly embedded in the social compass. The Swaminarayan dharma is posited as a transcendent version of Vaishnavism first and the universal sectarian *sanatana* dharma later (Vertovec, 2000). According to a *parshad*,

... once newcomers are initiated into the Swaminarayan lifestyle and philosophy, we explain to them higher things such as the subtle differences between Swaminarayan dharma and Vaishnavism, the uniqueness of Swaminarayan thought, particularly in the fact that God is already present for this dharma, and finally that it is actually an advanced version of Hindu sanatana dharma having universal ethics. (Ahmedabad: June 2012)

Furthermore, there is a cultivation of sectarian sentiments in the community. There is recurrent recalling of memories of Swaminarayan religion and Pramukh Swami as the epitome of giving and service. There are perennial discourses on *Akshar Purushottam* and Pramukh Swami in all the activities of BAPS. Furthermore, with ascetics/adherents holding key positions in the service mandate, sect sentiments permeate praxis naturally. Frequent references are made to the “text” of the Swaminarayan dharma and historical engagement in service, and the current material endowments provide for a “giving back to society” approach. With respect to the latter, a woman office-bearer at Shahibaug reports,

Through our loyal adherent base, there is a lot of material wealth that BAPS has. Temple consecration and preserving the Swaminarayan dharma is one activity, but apart from that there is a strong feeling that we need to “give back to society” which has propelled several of our social initiatives. Particularly the schools, hostels, watershed programmes and mobile dispensaries are looked at with that spirit. (Ahmedabad: April 2012)

Against this backdrop of faith practices and discourses, there are recurrent memories of Lord Swaminarayan and Pramukh Swami as epitomes of giving and service. BAPS promotes a way of thinking and being which is sect-specific. Apart from the ascetics, the administration staff and workers within the social initiatives are also Swaminarayanis, or *satsangis*.¹⁴ BAPS’s faith-based service delivery is then characterized by an interplay between sect-based social ethics, through the BAPS’s “bijana sukhma aapnu sukh” apothegm, and an apostolic positioning of sadhus on the social change/development mission. Memories are cultivated and maintained through the grace of the Lord, and his continuing

manifestations are considered to be the source, origin, and continuation of social and spiritual care. Taking forward the discussion on BAPS’s views on social stratification, social service also becomes a way of asserting the dominance of its traditional caste patrons (Patidars and Kanbis), as well as creating new hierarchies, based on the caste logic, where superiority is determined based on parameters of proximity and receipt of service. Thereby, a public space is built for the BAPS, which is at once exclusionary and agonistic—social service being the determinate fulcrum.

However, at times, BAPS also rationally calculates organizational interests and occasionally compromises on ideological purity relating to rituals, fasts, and vegetarianism when the costs of purity outweigh the benefits of observing it. In particular, the way BAPS *seva* activities manage the politics of heritage and nostalgia in a transnational context, simultaneously catering to market economics and retaining its own exclusivities vis-à-vis immediate others (i.e., other Hindu-based or faith-based organizations) and significant others, is a matter for me to explore in a future article, taking forward from Hanna Kim’s (2012) work.

Conclusion

Two aspects of BAPS’s social service are thus prominent and peculiar, namely, perpetuating sect culture and memory.

BAPS perpetuates a sect culture through its social service. Wallis’s (1975) classical definition of “sect” is corroborated in that BAPS claims to have an epistemological authority and privileged access to salvation and promotes an exclusive bonding among its followers. Service is based on the bedrock of the “in the joy of others lies our own” slogan and similar signature pronouncements of the teachers that have elements of social praxis embedded in them. Action, service, and work have both transcendental goals of inner transformation and practical ones concerned with making a tangible “social difference.” Hegemony is precipitated through sectarian theism and the accompanying caste, class, gender, and ethnicity hierarchical logic. To agree with Vertovec (2000) and A. M. Shah (2006), BAPS offers an almost political religious discourse with an enduring set of practices, including ritual communication, worship, and philanthropy/service. What this study contributes specifically (building on Angela Rudert’s contentions of the way BAPS *seva* is a means of spatiality and creating an engendered social capital) is that among faith-based institutions, BAPS’s model is unique in its delivery of social service. This is corroborated by the fact that in a “bridging” activity such as social service and outreach, BAPS manages to retain its exclusive sectarian sentiments, albeit even strengthen them, by perpetual guru remembrance.

The fact remains that BAPS’s social service cultivates and maintains a public memory of the Swaminarayan league. However, what holds is that as a transnational Hindu devotional community, in the Indian context, BAPS reaches out to

its publics through the proverbial “middle path”—not being too antagonistic to the unavowed “others” and at the same time, holding on to its own position. In that sense, the “Indian” milieu with its socio-political logics that inform its multiple publics also shapes BAPS’s ontologies—as an organization engaged in social and spiritual care (see Kim, 2012).

Through social service, the mandate is to bring BAPS’s worldview into the public realm. BAPS’s faith practices, which combine philanthropy and rituals, actively mediate the service ideology, that is, they are a critical component of the service ideology, both for the doers and the beneficiaries, and BAPS creates norms of community organizing around the sect’s principles. Among the associates, there are volitional service tendencies and also prescribed mandates and doctrines. Drawing on Hefferan (2007), it can be proposed that they provide spaces to negotiate realms not evident in strictly economic discourses, such as good/evil, morality, and work directed toward higher purposes. The mission is to respond to the Swaminarayan calling, and hence, religious imagery accompanies the service mission to communicate Swaminarayan altruism and glory in the “public face.” There is a certain sense of Habermasian “practical discourse” by which BAPS as an actor is engaged in moral argument about the foundations of life, thereby leading to a transformation of modes of social service. This means that BAPS’s ideals provide the necessary discourse ethics that become philosophical justifications of morality manifesting in acts of social service, within the frame of modernization (and hence, the reference to “practical”), where moral acts are also pragmatic (see Finlayson, 2000) and feed into some ulterior motives. The outcome of this circularity of morality, moral acts, and modernization, in the cultural sense, is to create shared imaginations and transformed subjectivities.

BAPS-inspired service is *realpolitik*, entrenched in the memories of its publics. Memories effectively translate into a BAPS ethos wherein the authoritarian aspect of the devotional relationship of followers with Swaminarayan and his successors is re-tooled to produce humanitarian or developmental effects (see Ikegame, 2012).¹⁵ Service for BAPS is not just the result of devolved governance but a relationship consequent on radical asymmetrical exchange harnessed for governmental ends in an era of liberalization. The humanitarian activities, from the devotee’s perspective, are far from value-neutral (Cohen, 2011) because followers see non-tangible gains from *seva*. BAPS *seva* is thus qualified by vivid memories of Pramukh Swami and his expansive agency. Remembrance of the Swaminarayan league of teachers and Pramukh Swami is for the followers a catalyst for social action and demonstrates a preference for such principles as upholding human rights, peace, and justice. The efficacy of Pramukh Swami and the *sadhus* of BAPS lie in their ability to provide solutions to devotees’ everyday problems and out-of-the-ordinary experience, which devotees take as an indication of the guru’s abilities as a spiritual guide and preceptor. This is also a guide for them to engage in what they term as good social activities. They participate in *seva* on behalf of gurus.

Service is seen as a component of spiritual development—a “meritorious activity that wears down the egoism and selfishness of modernity” (Warrier, 2006, p. 186). It is, as Warrier (2003) and Srinivas (2010) have said (in different contexts but equally applicable here), a form of practical spirituality.

However, BAPS engagement in core service sectors can be seen as entailing a partnership in secular development goals in an essentially resource-limited setting. The aspect of asymmetrical engagement (McKean’s, 1996, term) comes with the scholarly suggestion, as mentioned earlier, that such organizations engage in *seva* activities, at least in part, as a means of divesting themselves of wealth for tax purposes (see Warrier, 2006). *Seva* is thus a hyper-practice of BAPS to enable the practice of responsible citizenship. Secular partnerships (e.g., in its rural development, watershed development, and earthquake reconstruction projects) in service delivery of BAPS do not reflect secularization¹⁶ but a firm need for inclusion in development discourse through partnerships and devolved governance. This is emblematic of a middle path in the complex ideological landscape of neoliberal development—faith-based institutions neither contest neoliberalism completely nor comply. On the contrary, they develop suitable means to feed into the neoliberal agenda (through marketable salvation goods and *seva* as a form of exchange) simultaneously retaining their appeal to moral and spiritual factors and hence, a “beyond market” view of development (Jones & Petersen, 2011).

What thus emerges from the current study of BAPS is a sect culture that goes beyond simple instilling/extolling of virtues, portraying rather vanguards in the fulfillment of social obligations. BAPS’s operational ontology contains communitarian notions of social citizenship.¹⁷ Essentially, the commune as predominant and its ideological repertoire fertilizes/impregnates virgin aspects of charity/philanthropy. This is a stylized form of faith-based social logic¹⁸ and service to the public good by participating in the social exchange game.

Glossary

Akshar	the Godhead’s embodied form
Akshardham	heaven
bal mandal	a formal children’s group
BAPS	a branch of the Hindu sect called the Swaminarayan; BAPS stands for Bochasanwasi Shree Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha
Bhakti	a medieval tradition of devotion that challenged Brahminical orthodoxy by emphasizing one personal God and demystifying the Hindu caste hierarchy
bijana sukhma aapnu sukh	the Pramukh Swami maxim meaning “our happiness lies in that of others” or “in the joy of others lies our own”

(continued)

dana	charity
dharma	religion
ekantik dharma	religion that recognizes the supremacy of one deity; in the case of BAPS, Lord Swaminarayan
ghar mandir	a family shrine
ghar sabha	a family assembly
ghar satsang	a family prayer assembly
guru	a teacher
Hindutva	ideological view that Hinduism is most superior socially and politically
Jai Swaminarayan	Glory to Lord Swaminarayan, the BAPS greeting
jiva	the soul
Karyakar	a volunteer
karyakar mandal	a formal volunteers' group
khet talavidi	a farm pond
kishore/kishori mandal	a formal adolescents' group
Krishna mahant	a name for the Hindu deity/God a sadhu who works as a temple priest
mahila mandal mandal	a formal women's group a formal group
Navya Vishishtadvaita philosophy paramahansa	qualified monism a senior sadhu who has attained enlightenment
parampara	tradition
parshad	an ascetic in training
Purushottam	the Godhead
sadhana	spiritual discipline
sadhu	ascetic (noun)
Saguna form of Vaishnavite worship	devotion to a personified form of God
samkhyayogini	status attributed to widows so that they can serve the Lord and the fellowship in specially assigned spaces
sampradaya	a tradition, sect, or religious system relating to a succession of masters and disciples that serves as a spiritual channel
samuha bhojan sanatana	family norms of commensality universal
sanatana dharma	universal religion
sanstha	an organization
Satayuga	a golden age in the past when goodness prevailed and which is believed to be restorable
satsang	spiritual co-option (noun); Swaminarayani (adjective)
satsangi	a Swaminarayan follower, a Swaminarayani
seva	social service and outreach work
sevak	a person who does seva; karyakar

(continued)

Shikshapatri	one of the main BAPS texts containing verses giving precepts for BAPS members
swami	sage (noun)
Swaminarayan	the Hindu sect of which BAPS is a branch
Swaminarayani	a member of the Swaminarayan
Vachanamrutam	one of the main BAPS texts containing verses giving precepts for BAPS members
Vadtal Gadi	site of a temple believed to have been consecrated by Lord Swaminarayan in Vadtal, a village in Gujarat
Vaishnavite Hinduism	a branch of Hinduism whose followers venerate Lord Vishnu
vasudhaiva kutumbakam	a sense of "world family"
Vedanta	A school or group of traditions that is concerned with self-realization, by which one understands the ultimate nature of reality, Brahman
Vedas	the oldest of the Hindu scriptures pertaining to the Vedas
Vedic	travel by sadhus to villages to speak to the people about BAPS, conduct discourses, understand needs, and suggest social initiatives
village vicharan	travel by sadhus to villages to speak to the people about BAPS, conduct discourses, understand needs, and suggest social initiatives
Vishnu	a name for the Hindu deity/God of the trinity: Brahma (creator), Vishnu (preserver), and Shiva (destroyer)
Vrindavan	a town in Uttar Pradesh, India, near an ancient forest where the deity, Krishna, spent his childhood
yuvak/yuvati mandal	a formal youth group

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Notes

1. Vaishnavism is a branch of Hinduism. Its followers venerate Lord Vishnu. Within Vaishnavism, there are four main *sampradayas* (master-disciple lineages), each exemplified by a specific Vedic master (a master of the Vedas). The four *sampradayas* follow subtly different philosophical systems regarding the relationship between the *jiva* and Vishnu or Krishna, although they share the majority of other core beliefs.
2. Bochasanwasi Shree Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS) is a major organization within the Swaminarayan sect. The organization was established on June 5, 1907, by Shastri Yagnapurushdas or Shastriji Maharaj (1865-1951), a Sanskrit scholar and sadhu who left the *Vadtal*

- Gadi* of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya in 1905. A particular interpretation of Swaminarayan's teachings led to the formation of this organization. This interpretation is known as Akshar Purushottam Upasana. The geographical spread and growth of the organization has now made it a sect in its own right, but in principle, it remains a branch of Swaminarayan.
3. A BAPS information sheet reports that after "having mastered the scriptures by the age of 7 [Swaminarayan] renounced home at 11 to embark upon an 11-year spiritual pilgrimage on foot across the length and breadth of India" and that "eventually settling in Gujarat, He spent the next 30 years spearheading a socio-spiritual revolution" (BAPS Sadhus, n.d., p. 3). During Swaminarayan's travels, he was bestowed with several names, including Neelkanth. At the turn of the 18th century, Neelkanth met the ascetic Ramanand Swami and was anointed as his spiritual heir. However, Swaminarayan was to establish an independent following that culminated in the Swaminarayan sect. Swaminarayan's travels ended in Gujarat, where he built several temples, and where, along with Rajasthan, the largest number of devotees resides.
 4. *Navya Vishishtadvaita* philosophy is a variation of the Vedanta school. The Vedanta school or group of traditions is concerned with self-realization, by which one understands the ultimate nature of reality, Brahman. It recognizes the existence of one unique and special Absolute Being, on which all other things that exist depend for their being. The fully fledged emphasis on transcendence emerges in the Vedanta school and its variations. The Vedanta school has many further variations: Advaita (non-dualism), Dvaita (dualism), Dvaitadvaita (dual non-dualism), and Vishishtadvaita (qualified non-dualism, or monism). For more details, see Potter (2008).
 5. *Saguna* is a tradition of the medieval Bhakti kind in India. This is in contrast to the *Nirguna* tradition, which dwells on devotion toward the formless. *Saguna* tradition traces its early history to devotion to the Indian deity, Krishna, and subsequently to other forms of devotion to Krishna in the 19th and 20th centuries (McGregor, 1992)—Lord Swaminarayan being considered to be a recent incarnation of Krishna by the tradition. The focus is on the concept of human divinity, love, service, and the supremacy of a devotional sentiment toward God in the human form.
 6. The evangelical term *sect* can be used for BAPS because of its characteristics of order, hierarchy, administration, and organized social service.
 7. The BAPS Watershed Department examines watershed management issues in Saurashtra and Sabarkantha. Thus far, around 75 concrete check dams and 33 *khet talavidis* have been constructed, and extensive maintenance work has been undertaken on ponds and check dams. As the projects function on a zero administrative budget, all engineers are volunteers. Watershed projects entail the holistic development of rainwater catchment areas. The Defence Research and Development Organisation grants a subsidy and stipulates a limit of 3 years in which to complete each watershed project. This comprises water collection, land development, animal husbandry, afforestation, improving farming techniques, and training for self-employment and micro credit. The core is to facilitate a self-help group (SHG) from the local area to implement these, with BAPS providing the technical expertise. In 1997, the check dam scheme of the Gujarat Government was also adopted by BAPS. In this project, the site of the check dam was decided with the help of satellite photographs, a government advisor, BAPS experts, and local people. Women whom I spoke to were involved in some aspects of SHG formation and office work in this project.
 8. The Gujarat earthquake reconstruction project has been one of the most vital and well-documented of the BAPS social service initiatives. The relief operations have been fourfold: rescue, relief, reassurance and restoring dignity, and rehabilitation. This has entailed construction of earthquake-resistant houses, social engineering (the brochure claims that rather than building houses in straight row-like formats, they are to follow a courtyard pattern so as to rebuild a micro-village environment), construction of educational institutions, and environmental planning. Women followers whom I spoke to were engaged in various aspects of this project, ranging from village outreach to assisting in the development of educational institutions.
 9. These concepts have been applied by the sociologist, M. N. Srinivas (1966). "Brahminisation" means moving upward in the traditional caste hierarchy through either matrimony or ritual processes. "Sanskritisation" means upward social mobility through an emulation of the behavior patterns and modes of social interaction and exchange of the traditional upper castes (see Srinivas, 1952).
 10. *Akshar* Brahman combines Lord Swaminarayan as Brahman, or Godhead, and subsequent spiritual leaders as *Akshar*, or Lord Swaminarayan's embodied form, through whom he continues to persist.
 11. *Satsangis* are those who keep good and morally appropriate (Swaminarayan) company. Thus, they consider themselves to be exclusive and superior to Hindus in general and to non-Hindus, who are the unvowed others (A. M. Shah, 2006).
 12. In the four decades of systematized initiatives thus far, many varied projects have been undertaken, including relief, rehabilitation, and reconstruction following famines, typhoons, flooding, droughts, and earthquakes; the establishment of educational institutions and student hostels, hospitals and dispensaries, and health research centers; and de-addiction campaigns and research into social harmony.
 13. Neubert (2008) has studied the notion of *dépense* through an analysis of two cases from a recent history of Vaishnavism, that is, the temple festival in Vrindavan and the development of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). He studied the notion of *dépense*, as developed by Marcel Mauss, Robert Hertz, and Georges Bataille, as an indicator of religious commitment. By constructing a macroeconomic theory that includes religious behavior, recent theories of religious economics are a part of, and reproduce, a modern discourse of rationality that rules out, rather than understands, forms of irrationality such as unproductive expenditure or *dépense*. The market theory of religion discusses how religious movements compete for members. There have been various approaches to the inner economics of such movements. With *dépense*, two seemingly diverse views of human existence converge—the notion of homo abstinentis, that is, living in renunciation, and homo prodigus, that is, squandering. Humans seek what they perceive to be rewards and avoid what they perceive to be costs. Because all human action, for rational choice theorists, is guided by rational consideration about how to receive particular rewards by means of least cost, there

is little room for unproductive expenditure. Not every reward is of an economic nature, however: There are non-empirical or semi-empirical compensators such as the promise of salvation and membership in the group of the chosen.

14. As “satsang” refers to spiritual co-option, or good company, “satsangis” are those who keep good and morally appropriate company. This meaning has been adopted by BAPS for naming its group of followers.
15. Ikegame (2012) further says that “insofar as a logic associated with one domain (bhakti) is transferred to another (governmental), with the production of potentially unanticipated results (e.g., life-changing as well as life-saving blood transfusions), we are provided here with a further striking example of the domaining effects of the guru” (p. 22).
16. The secularization thesis promotes three premises—religious differentiation, decline, and privatization (Casanova, 1994).
17. Communitarian notions of social citizenship are in contrast with a privatized, economic, and individualistic “civil society” (McMillin, 2011).
18. Faith-based social logic according to Huff (2010) is both religious and practical in nature—making sense of and assessing some of the key assumptions of a particular form of faith-based development.

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