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Kari Irwin
Illinois Wesleyan University

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“A Place of Paramount Peace”:
The Unofficial Nationalism of an Officially Peaceful Movement

Kari Irwin
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Illinois Wesleyan University
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I. Introduction

Immediately following the November 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks, Pramukh Swami Maharaj,¹ the spiritual and organizational leader of a Gujarati Hindu reform sect called the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha,² called to order hundreds of prayer assemblies in Gujarat and abroad, and appealed to his *satsangis* (followers) and all Indian citizens to respond to the attacks with prayer, faith, and peace. His statement, which is still accessible on the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha website, is clear: “It is imperative that we stay strong and have faith. We strongly feel that violence is not the answer to terrorism.”³

Pramukh Swami’s public appeal in response to these attacks echoed the similar appeal he made six years earlier on September 24, 2002, following the murder of 33 and the wounding of 70 worshippers and visitors by two gunmen who invaded the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha spiritual complex, called Akshardham,⁴ in Gandhinagar, Gujarat.⁵

Because the gunmen in both attacks were identified as Muslim, Pramukh Swami’s statements were of particular importance. The situation in Gujarat between Hindus and Muslims was, and continues to be, volatile. Rather than incite Hindus to retaliatory violence against

¹ In English, “Pramukh” means “president”; Pramukh Swami Maharaj is Swami Narayanswarupdas’s nickname.

² Hereafter, referred to as the “Akshar Purushottam Sanstha,” or more simply, “the Sanstha.”

³ Akshar Purushottam Sanstha, “Announcements,” Akshar Purushottam Sanstha, <http://www.swaminarayan.org/announcements/2008/prayer.htm>, (accessed April 12, 2009).

⁴ There are two meanings of “Akshardham:” 1.) a spiritual complex (on earth) that includes monuments, cultural and devotional activities, and often a temple, and 2.) the divine abode of Bhagwan Swaminarayan; the ultimate goal of *satsangis*

⁵ Akshar Purushottam Sanstha, “Temple Carnage: Terrorist Attack at Akshardham,” Akshar Purushottam Sanstha, <http://www.akshardham.com/gujarat/news/2002/akshardham/report.htm> (accessed April 4, 2009).

Muslims, Pramukh Swami issued a public call “to citizens of India to maintain peace and harmony in the wake of this national tragedy.”⁶

As the guru-saint for the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha, which claims over 5 million devotees worldwide,⁷ Pramukh Swami’s word is no small thing. He is the administrative and spiritual head to a self-proclaimed “United Nations affiliated social-spiritual organization” with 9,090 global centers, 550 *mandirs* (temples), 780 *sadhus* (ascetics), 55,000 volunteers.⁸ The Akshar Purushottam Sanstha is committed to service in the following areas: Moral and Cultural Care, Medical Care, Educational Care, Environmental Care, Women’s Wing, Social Care, Relief Work, Tribal Care,⁹ Spiritual Care.¹⁰ The Akshar Purushottam Sanstha also organizes a remarkable amount of service projects, such as the construction of medical facilities and schools, environmental clean up, de-addiction clinics, and relief work, which are funded and run by satsangi donors and volunteers.¹¹ Since the Swaminarayan Sampraday’s¹² inception in

⁶ Akshar Purushottam Sanstha, “Temple Carnage: Terrorist Attack at Akshardham,” Akshar Purushottam Sanstha, <http://www.akshardham.com/gujarat/news/2002/akshardham/report.htm> (accessed April 4, 2009).

⁷ Raymond Brady Williams, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hinduism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 68.

⁸ Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha, “A Place of Paramount Peace,” *Visitor’s Pamphlet* (Chicago: BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, accessed 2008).

⁹ “Tribal Care” refers to assistance the Sanstha provides communities classified as “tribal” or “*adivasi*” by the Indian state governments. We will deal with the Sanstha’s work in tribal areas later in this paper.

¹⁰ Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha, “Activities,” Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha, <http://www.swaminarayan.org/activities/index.htm> (accessed March 5, 2009).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² As Williams points out, “Sampraday” means “a tradition which has been handed down from a founder through successive religious teachers and which shapes the followers into distinct fellowship with institutional forms.” (*An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hinduism*, 3); Although I will occasionally refer more broadly to the Swaminarayan Sampraday, I will primarily focus on the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha, which, referring again to Williams [in *Religions of Immigrants from India and Pakistan: New Threads in the American Tapestry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 161], claims the most followers outside of India.

nineteenth century Gujarat, it has grown dramatically, both at home and abroad, particularly in the last 30 years.¹³

Perhaps conscious of its visible role in the representation of Hinduism to the West, the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha seems deeply concerned with how it presents itself, and how it is perceived by, the global public. The Sanstha describes the Delhi Akshardham, which features a cinema hall, musical fountain show, and a boat ride among other attractions, as “[showcasing] the essence of India’s ageless art, borderless culture and timeless values.”¹⁴ The mandirs are constructed in a “traditional” Hindu style, and are designated as “A Place of Paramount Peace” in the visitor pamphlets, which also emphasize the mandirs’ message that “every curve, corner, and crevice of mine sends signals of peace far and wide.”¹⁵ The Sanstha’s promotional literature proudly features a comment from WGN Morning News-Chicago that calls the Chicago mandir “an international landmark of peace for visitors of all faiths.”¹⁶

Perhaps partially because of this ostensibly peaceful presentation, there are several reasons for us to look more carefully at this officially peaceful and tolerant movement. The Akshar Purushottam Sanstha, a sect of the Gujarati Swaminarayan movement, has grown rapidly—in large part due to the overrepresentation of Gujarati-Hindus among the Indian diaspora.¹⁷ The Gujarati community is influential and wealthy. In fact, because of its size and

¹³ Raymond Brady Williams, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hinduism*, 68.

¹⁴ Atlanta Dunia, “BAPS Centenary Celebrations attended by 500,000,” Atlanta Dunia, <http://www.atlantadunia.com/dunia/FEATURES/F93.htm>, (accessed January 1, 2009).

¹⁵ Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha, “A Place of Paramount Peace.”

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Gujaratis make up roughly 40% of the United States Hindu population. (Anantanand Rambachan, “Global Hinduism: The Hindu Diaspora,” *Contemporary Hinduism: Ritual, Culture, and Practice*, ed. Robin Rinehart (Santa Barbara, California: ABD-CLIO, Inc., 2004).

growth in the diaspora, as well as its prolific construction of mandirs,¹⁸ the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha has become the “face” of American Hinduism.¹⁹ Precisely because of its prominence in the Hindu community outside of Gujarat, and because of the current political and social climate in Gujarat, it is important to take a second look into such a large, international expression of Gujarati identity. The simultaneous rise in prominence of Hindu nationalist organizations in the diaspora has also garnered the attention of several scholars, and such a coincidence may indicate the Sanstha’s role in the cultivation of “diasporic nationalism.”²⁰

Such concerns have led some scholars to draw an explicit connection between the Swaminarayan movement and the more militant, hard-line *Hindutva*²¹ movement led by organizations under the Hindu nationalist umbrella organization, the Sangh Parivar (Family of Organizations), such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sanstha (the RSS), Bharatiya Janata Party (the BJP), the Vishwa Hindu Parisad (the VHP), and the Bajrang Dal.²² American scholar

¹⁸ See Hanna H. Kim, “Edifice Complex: Swaminarayan Bodies and Buildings in the Diaspora,” in *Gujaratis in the West: Evolving Identities in Contemporary Society*, ed. Anjoom A. Mukadam and Sharmina Mawani (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007): 59-78, for her argument on how the construction of mandirs relates to Swaminarayan devotionalism.

¹⁹ Anantanand Rambachan, “Global Hinduism: The Hindu Diaspora.”

²⁰ Prema Kurien, “Multiculturalism, Religion, and Diasporic Nationalism: The Development of American Hinduism” *Social Problems* 51:3 (August 2004): 362-385; See also, Prema Kurien, *A Place at the Multicultural Table: The Development of an American Hinduism* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2007); or Steven Vertovec, “Three Meanings of “Diaspora,” Exemplified among South Asian Religions” in *Diaspora* 6 (1997): 277-299; In my unpublished essay, “‘There Forever is Gujarat:’ The Diasporic Nationalism of Gujarati Fundamentalism” (2008), I use Kurien’s concept of diasporic nationalism to discuss the way in which the Swaminarayan Sampraday in the Gujarati diaspora is instrumental in nurturing Gujarati nationalism.

²¹ In English, *Hindutva* means something like “Hinduness,” the concept of which was laid out by Vinayak Damodar Sarvarkar in his famous book, *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* (1923).

²² For the purposes of this paper, I will use Christophe Jaffrelot’s definition of Hindu nationalism, which promotes the ideas that “India’s national identity was summarized by Hinduism,” and “Indian culture was to be defined as Hindu culture, and the minorities were to be assimilated by their paying allegiance to the symbols and mainstays of the majority as those of

Martha Nussbaum, for example, is particularly concerned with the group's strict rules, rapid growth, and veneration for its leader. Taking these aspects of the group to mean the Akshar Purushottam movement is, in reality, a religious cult, she implies that the group is engaged in inculcating militant Hindu nationalistic ideology among its followers.²³ Others are quick to lump the Swaminarayan movement in with organizations promoting a Hindu India, such as those mentioned above associated with the Sangh Parivar. For these scholars and intellectuals, the Sanstha's self-description as apolitical as well as its emphasis on world peace is a cover-up.

Others, like Raymond Brady Williams and Hanna H. Kim, rightfully defend the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha against such criticism. However, Williams and Kim have tended to take their defense too far the other way. For them, the Sanstha represents a peaceful and highly successful devotional movement, which in many ways it is. A problem arises, though, when these scholars refuse to allow for any criticism of the movement or to entertain the possibility that the organization has, to use the concept Brian A. Hatcher applies to Hindu discourse more generally, a "darker silhouette."²⁴ An organization, like a person, is complex, able to adjust its attitude for different contexts (or in different company), and may be able to present what seem to be contradictory faces.

The tensions evoked by this division of scholarship on the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha help us to see, perhaps, the need for middle ground. In this paper, I argue that despite the Sanstha's official message of peace, ecumenism and tolerance, the group's rhetoric and activities

the nation," [*Hindu Nationalism: A Reader*, ed. Christophe Jaffrelot (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 5.]

²³ See the chapter entitled, "Diaspora Community," in Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Clash Within: Democracy, Religious Violence, and India's Future* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

²⁴ Hatcher, *Eclecticism and Modern Hindu Discourse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 139.

reveal an unofficial side of the Sanstha that may foster intolerance, fundamentalism, and, possibly, a Hindu nationalist agenda. This connection is not to be found at an official, or even public, level. In order to accurately assess the movement's role as a transnational Gujarati Hindu movement, we must reach a middle ground between the currently polarized scholarship, and critically, but empathetically, examine the Sanstha's objectives as a global movement.

II. The Swaminarayan Movement

Before we begin to make sense of the divide in scholarship, we should briefly discuss the Swaminarayan tradition more generally. In nineteenth-century Gujarat, a sadhu named Sahajanand Swami (1781-1830) founded the Swaminarayan Sampraday as a Vaishnavite Hindu reform movement with a renewed commitment to *bhakti* (devotion) and *dharma* (purity of conduct).²⁵ These two commitments remain the driving forces behind the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha.

The Akshar Purushottam Sanstha split off as a separate sect from the original Swaminarayan dioceses in 1907 over disagreements on successorship and theology. Shastriji Maharaj (Yagnapurushdas Swami, 1865-1951) headed this split, and his followers claim that he is the third true successor of Bhagwan Swaminarayan (Sahajanand Swami), after Bhagwan Swaminarayan's ideal devotee, Gunatitand Swami, and Gunatitand's successor, Bhagatji Maharaj.²⁶

Based on Shastriji Maharaj's innovations, Akshar Purushottam satsangis believe that Bhagwan Swaminarayan (God) came to earth as a human manifestation (Sahajanand Swami) of

²⁵ *Vachanamrut*, xxii

²⁶ *Vachanamrut*, xxii; Sadhu Mujundcharandas, *Vachanamrut Handbook* (Ahmedabad: Swaminarayan Aksharpith, 2004), 234-241.

Purushottam, the first eternal principle of the universe. The second eternal principle, Akshar (the abode of god), also comes as a human and is the “eternal companion of Purushottam in whom Purushottam dwells in his totality.”²⁷ Gunatitanand Swami was the first manifestation of Akshar, and all of subsequent leaders of the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha have been manifestations of Akshar. These guru-leaders are also *sadhus*, or ascetics, and thus take vows of celibacy, poverty, and the renouncement of their ego, history, and family.²⁸

Because power is consolidated into the hands of the living Akshar, the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha currently benefits from “an effective modern administrative organization and a powerful central decision-making body, with almost absolute authority in the hands of one man, Swami Narayanswarupdas.”²⁹ In fact, the authority of Swami Narayanswarupdas (Pramukh Swami), the Sanstha’s leader and therefore the divine abode of God, is such that he has absolute, divinely sanctioned power. As the divine abode of God on earth, Pramukh Swami is worshipped by the Akshar Purushottam satsangis in what is called *guru-bhakti* (devotion to the guru). In her study of Swaminarayan devotionalism and “place-making,” Kim explains, “satsangis are quick to say, [Pramukh Swami] is ‘our reason for living,’ ‘our direct path for release from this life.’”³⁰ Devotees worship Pramukh Swami as god in the same way they worship *murtis* (religious images) of Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

We may access adult satsangis’ rhetoric of devotion for Pramukh Swami through the expressions of their children: children’s ideas about their Swaminarayan faith may be seen, partially, as products of what their parents and elders have taught them. A children’s section,

²⁷ Williams, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hinduism*, 84.

²⁸ Williams, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hinduism*, 85.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

³⁰ Hanna H. Kim, “Managing Deterritorialization,” in *New Religions and Globalization: Empirical, Theoretical, and Methodological Perspectives*, ed. Armin W. Geertz and Margit Warburg (Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 2008), 233.

called “Kid’s Creations,” of the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha’s extensive website (www.baps.org), features children’s answers to various questions posted on the site. Many children’s responses to the question, “Why are you proud to be a devotee of BAPS?” contain exaltations of Pramukh Swami’s greatness. As one 11 year-old child puts it, he is proud to be a devotee of the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha “because we have got such a great guru in the form of God.” Another child, aged 12, explains that, “with Bapa’s blessing everyday I learn something new and I hope to please Bapa so Bapa can be proud of me...”³¹ Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan children’s understanding of Pramukh Swami as a father-figure is a testament not only to his divinely sanctioned power but also to his charisma.

Working alongside the devotional aspect of the movement is the strict code of conduct outlined and emphasized by Sahajanand Swami in the *Shikshapatri*. Satsangis take five vows upon initiation:

1. *Ahimsa* (non-violence) toward all living beings.³²
2. No consumption of intoxicants or addictive drugs.³³
3. Do not commit adultery.³⁴
4. Do not steal.³⁵
5. Do not defile oneself or another.³⁶

³¹ Bochananwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha, “Kids’ Creations,” Bochananwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha, <http://kids.baps.org/kidscreation/result/creation33.htm>, (accessed February 20, 2009); “Bapa,” which in English means “father,” is an affectionate nickname for Pramukh Swami.

³² *Shikshapatri*, 40; The *Shikshapatri* contains the Swaminarayan movement’s code of conduct.

³³ *Ibid.*, 95.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 115.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 98-104.

Beyond these five vows, there are 223 other rules for proper conduct in the *Shikshapatri*, which are divided up by status. Yet, even strictly following the vows and the code of conduct in the *Shikshapatri (niyam)* does not ensure that a Swaminarayan follower is truly a part of the *Satsang* (community). To be considered a true satsangi, the individual has to also possess “firm conviction and knowledge of the manifestation of God in human form” (*nishchay*), and maintain kinship ties with fellow satsangis “through thick and thin” (*paksh*).³⁷ Thus, community, purity of conduct, and devotion are essential and defining aspects of the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha. In the diaspora, the Akshar Purushottam community is tightly knit both by a shared love for Pramukh Swami and its emphasis on right conduct. It is this combined emphasis on community, conduct, and devotion that simultaneously makes it successful in the diaspora in maintaining a transnational religious identity, and also paves the way for a situation of religious fundamentalism, which we will discuss later.

III. Choosing Sides

Despite the overwhelming influence the Swaminarayan Sampraday has on the character of Hinduism outside India, surprisingly few scholars have dealt with the tradition. Even fewer have dealt specifically with the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha. Among the few scholars and intellectuals who have discussed the tradition (either briefly or in detail), we notice a split. On one side, in keeping with the current “norms of multiculturalism”³⁸ and emphases on cultural sensitivity, scholars are reluctant to criticize any aspect of a group (be it religious or ethnic) of which they are not part. Scholars on the other side of the divide, however, are deeply concerned

³⁷ Mujundcharandas, *Vachanamrut Handbook*, 222.

³⁸ Kurien, *A Place at the Multicultural Table*, 5; for more on the role of multiculturalism, see Kurien, *A Place at the Multicultural Table*, chapter 1.

(perhaps to the point of paranoia) with hot topics like cults, religious violence, and militant nationalism. Such scholars look for signs of “cults” everywhere and subconsciously (or sometimes consciously) take as a threat a minority group’s pride in its culture or a specific ethnic group’s attempt at cultural preservation.

Part of the problem seems to be the issue of complexity. As Brian A. Hatcher suggests, there is often a “dark silhouette” to a history (or discourse, person, or organization), even to a period that is otherwise generally interpreted in a positive light.³⁹ Hatcher gives the example of the Enlightenment, for which the dark side holds the origins of fascism, and eventually, of Hitler.⁴⁰ The dark side of a history or discourse, however, does not trump the positive elements of that history or discourse. There are many ways to read each story. For Hatcher, “the fruit” of modern Hindu discourse can be both sweet and “sour.”⁴¹ Thus, we should neither construe the “discourse of modern Hinduism [as] sacrosanct,”⁴² nor deconstruct it as illegitimate or wholly negative.

Following Hatcher’s logic, we should seek a balance between apology and condemnation. Reaching middle ground seems to be a difficult position to maintain, particularly in the case of scholarship on the Swaminarayan Sampraday. Wendy Doniger describes this middle ground in the study of religions as a “razor’s edge between detachment and empathy.”⁴³ The two primary scholars of the Swaminarayan movement, Williams and Kim, are quick to defend the movement against any sort of criticism. Doniger might say Kim and Williams “care

³⁹ Hatcher, *Eclecticism and Modern Hindu Discourse*, 139.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Brian A. Hatcher, *Eclecticism and Modern Hindu Discourse*, 165-167.

⁴² Ibid., 169.

⁴³ Wendy Doniger, “The Uses and Misuses of Other People’s Myths,” *Journal of American Academy of Religions* 54:2 (Summer 1986): 219-239, 231.

for” the Swaminarayan movement.⁴⁴ While their approach is empathetic, they are not preserving enough critical distance. On the other hand, with regard to scholarship on the Swaminarayan movement, Nussbaum provides an example of detachment—her work on the Swaminarayan movement lacks the empathy required to taste the sweetness of the tradition’s “good fruit,” of which, Kim and Williams know, there is an abundance.

Raymond Brady Williams, who has been engaged in research on the Swaminarayan movement the longest and the most broadly, has published several articles and books since 1984 on the Sampraday. Williams’ work includes ethnographic, textual, and historical research on the theology, iconography, history, growth, leadership, and transnational character of all three of the Swaminarayan sects. His *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hinduism* is a result of over two decades of research, and is, at the time of this writing, the only scholarly book available in English devoted entirely to the Swaminarayan Sampraday.

More recently, Hanna H. Kim has come to be the other major scholar of the Swaminarayan movement, and of the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha in particular.⁴⁵ With Williams’ more general research forming the foundation, Kim has been able to examine more closely specific aspects of the movement, such as the use of the construction of mandirs in the

⁴⁴ Ibid., 231.

⁴⁵ Outside of Williams’ and Kim’s work, there has been surprisingly little research on the tradition. Rachel Dwyer’s article, “Caste, Religion and Sect in Gujarat,” in *Desh Pardesh: The South Asian Presence in Britain* (New Delhi: D.K. Fine Art Press, 1996), works briefly with the Swaminarayan tradition as one of two religious traditions she discusses in connection to Gujarati emigration. Farhat Naz also deals directly with the Swaminarayan Sampraday as part of the Gujarati diaspora cultural formation in her brief article, “Swaminarayan Movement and Gujarati Diasporic Identity,” in *Man in India* 87 (2007): 129-136. The few scholars, including Naz, whose works have focused on the Swaminarayan Sampraday, have primarily relied upon Williams’ research.

formation of Swaminarayan identity and devotionism, and the way in which Swaminarayan devotees “manage deterritorialization” in the diaspora.⁴⁶

Both Williams and Kim fall to the first side of the divide described above. Williams avoids any mention of the words “nationalism” or “fundamentalism” in connection with the Swaminarayan Hindus, and Kim mentions them only to argue for such terms’ inapplicability with regard to the Swaminarayan movement. According to Kim, the transnational character of the movement “appears to provide a ready-made case for the study of religion and its intersection with various social and political-economic processes such as globalization, transnationalism, and even fundamentalism.”⁴⁷ For Kim, making such links is not only too easy, but it is not correct. In her words, “such a project is hobbled by problems of representation and, in the end, is unlikely to offer ways of transcending other-ness.”⁴⁸ Perhaps recognizing, on some level, these links herself, Kim is concerned with painting an alternate picture of the Swaminarayan movement—a picture of only the movement’s “light” side.

As part of this effort to curb criticism of the Swaminarayan Sampraday, both Williams and Kim emphasize the movement’s tendency to be ecumenical and inclusive. For instance, in Williams’ brief, unpublished essay “Migrations, Religions, and Identities,” he explains that the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha in the U.S. has been incorporating Siva-Parvati statues into their mandirs and celebrating the Shaivite holiday Shivapatri in an attempt to include Shaivite Hindus.⁴⁹ For Williams, this is demonstrative of the Sanstha’s attempt to generously reach out to non-Vaishnavite Hindus and maybe even non-Gujaratis. Yet, there is another way to read into

⁴⁶ See Kim, “Edifice Complex”; Kim, “Managing Deterritorialization”, 226.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 226.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 238.

⁴⁹ Raymond Brady Williams, “Migrations, Religions, Identities,” *unpublished essay*, 9, used with permission from the author.

the Sanstha's inclusivism: as we will see with regard to Hindu nationalist movements, inclusivism can often be a way for Hindus to assert power over the religious minorities, such as Jains and Buddhists, that they forcibly include in the Hindu fold.

In the same essay, Williams also seems to be responding to the ostensibly unvoiced criticism that Swaminarayan satsangis living in the diaspora use the movement to avoid interaction with their host society. Williams argues that the establishment of and participation in ethnic organizations like the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha is “not to isolate themselves from society, but to create more secure positions from which to negotiate relations in society and save their children.”⁵⁰ This is necessary, he argues, for “personal health and social effectiveness.”⁵¹ Like Kim, Williams seems to feel a pressure to address what he sees as potential sources for criticism by non-Swaminarayan devotees, and his defensive response is indicative of his tendency to excuse, and make excuses for, the movement. It is apparent that he has at least two audiences in mind: these potential detractors and the Swaminarayan satsangis themselves.

Though a scholar's awareness of her or his own cultural bias is, of course, important, by shielding a group from any sort of criticism, we not only lose our ability to understand or address the “dark silhouettes” that are part of every culture, but we also de-humanize those we are trying to protect. Being overly cautious and approving in our analysis denies the flawed nature of the human—it “otherizes” the group we want to appreciate. It also reveals a misplaced assumption that to support a movement entails an utter lack of criticism, and that to shed light on the “dark side” of a movement is to work in opposition to a movement. Such an assumption limits both the depth and also the complexity of scholarship.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 11.

⁵¹ Ibid.

However, the other side of the divide is not necessarily any more fair or correct. Kim and Williams are particularly troubled by Nussbaum's treatment of the Swaminarayan sect in her *The Clash Within: Democracy, Religious Violence, and India's Future*, and with good reason. In the chapter on the diaspora community, Nussbaum, who comes to the tradition from a liberal, secular perspective, describes a visit to the Chicago mandir (in Bartlett, Illinois) of the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha. Though this visit is her first interaction with the Sanstha, Nussbaum begins her visit with the implicit assumption not only that the satsangis will be openly anti-Muslim, but also that their antipathy towards Muslims is a common subject of conversation at the mandir. She asks her research assistant, who is a Gujarati Muslim and therefore has an Indian-Islamic name, to change her name to one that is more typically Gujarati Hindu.

Leaving aside the question of why she even felt a need to give her name and the names of her research assistants to their guide on the tour of the mandir, which is something I have never felt compelled to do on my many visits to the same mandir, Nussbaum's explains that she made this "precaution" in order to "hear opinions about Muslims frankly expressed."⁵² Ironically, despite the precaution, she does not hear any sentiments that could be construed as advancing a Hindu nationalist agenda. Instead, Nussbaum is forced to read something sinister into the tour guide's smile and his pride in the mandir's technological innovations, which she takes to be signs that he is a brainwashed follower of an "authoritarian cult."⁵³ Finally, Nussbaum asks her guide if the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha coordinates any activities with the "nearby" chapter of the Hindu Swayamsevak Sanstha (the U.S. branch of the RSS).⁵⁴ According to Nussbaum, "our

⁵² Nussbaum, *The Clash Within*, 303.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ This chapter is located in Villa Park, IL, 30-40 minutes driving distance from Bartlett, IL.

young man simply pretended utter confusion at this point, as if he had never heard of the HSS.”⁵⁵ By the end of her anecdote, Nussbaum has painted a very negative picture of an evasive, brain-washed community of cult-followers.

Nussbaum, however, is not the first to condemn the Swaminarayan movement as “cultish” or anti-Muslim. Indian activist and intellectual, Girish Patel,⁵⁶ has no problem explicitly labeling the Swaminarayan tradition “anti-dalit” and “anti-Muslim.”⁵⁷ According to Patel, the Swaminarayan movement, “with its hostility to Muslims,” is partly to blame for inter-religious violence and the rise of the Hindutva movement in Gujarat.⁵⁸ However, because Patel’s remarks appear as a “commentary” in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, he does not provide any concrete supporting evidence or other scholarly references. Moreover, his political bias against Indian right wing politics must be kept in mind.

Though Patel’s claims should be used with caution, they also should not be disregarded. Patel provides us with a secular Gujarati perspective, and as such, his arguments should certainly be examined in more detail. That there is a bias and a lack of evidentiary support in his article does not preclude the possibility that he offers valid and valuable insights. It simply means that the connections he makes cannot be used as evidence in and of themselves.

To my knowledge, the only other scholar to claim an overt connection between the Swaminarayan Sampraday and Hindu Nationalism is Parita Mukta, in her study of Hindu nationalism outside India. For Mukta, who focuses on the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha in England, Pramukh Swami is one of the two primary “saffron-clad figures fronting [the Hindutva

⁵⁵ Ibid., 327.

⁵⁶ Girish Patel is a senior lawyer at the High Court of Gujarat.

⁵⁷ Girish Patel, “Narendra Modi’s One-Day Cricket: What and Why?” *Economic and Political Weekly* 37:48 (November-December 2002): 4826-4837, 4829.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 4835.

movement's] momentum."⁵⁹ She contends that the Swaminarayan tradition has given in to "the politicization of contemporary Hinduism [that] has seen the embroilment of virtually all religious sects within the agenda of Hindutva."⁶⁰

Yet Mukta, like Patel and Nussbaum, offers very little evidence to get to this point. Her main argument for the Swaminarayan movement's involvement in representing Hindu Nationalism comes from three instances of interaction between the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha, represented by Pramukh Swami, and a Hindu nationalist organization: First, she claims that "the presence... of Pramukh Swami... within the public manifestations of VHP⁶¹ activities" in Great Britain proves that he "[enunciates] the political agenda of the VHP."⁶² She does not specify what these "activities" are, nor does she cite any other source. Because the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha is formally and publicly apolitical, especially in the West where it has a stake in preserving an image of tolerance and non-violence, conclusions about the Sanstha's political agenda cannot be drawn lightly. Mukta's lack of specificity is not only unconvincing, but the context of Pramukh Swami's vague association with the VHP in Great Britain may have been completely innocent—if, for instance, the VHP had organized a pan-Hindu cultural event in London, and invited all of the Hindu groups to represent themselves, a transnational group that relies on diaspora membership, such as the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha, would most likely want to participate. A situation like that might show that Pramukh Swami is not antipathetic to the VHP, but it certainly would not be proof that he is a spokesperson for the organization.

Mukta also takes the "ceremonial anointment of L. K. Advani" at the 1995 inauguration of the North London Swaminarayan Mandir to be expressive of "a public embracing of the

⁵⁹ Parita Mukta, "The Public Face of Hindu Nationalism," 455.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Vishwa Hindu Parishad, the Hindu nationalist umbrella organization

⁶² Parita Mukta, "The Public Face of Hindu Nationalism," 454.

politics of Hindutva in the religious life of the diaspora.”⁶³ She then asserts, again without evidence, that the parade following the inauguration was “stewarded by cadres of the RSS.”⁶⁴ With regard to the former argument, what she does not point out is that the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha brings in famous and powerful people from all over the country to anoint when they inaugurate a new mandir. For instance, according to the Swaminarayan.org website, the leaders who were anointed at the 2006 grand opening of the Delhi Akshardham included: President of India, A. P. J. Abdul Kalam; Prime Minister of India, Manmohan Singh; Leader of the Opposition Party, L. K. Advani; LT Governor of Delhi, B. L. Joshi, and “many other leading dignitaries from all over the country.”⁶⁵ The most striking feature these men share is not their political beliefs but merely that they are all public figures in positions of power. Rather than an unequivocal endorsement of Hindu nationalism by the Akshar Purushottam sect, we may instead come away with the impression that the sect seems interested in gaining national and international attention.

Because these claims are unsubstantiated, they trade in a tendency toward suspicion and may spread false information. Such an interpretative perspective obscures the positive aspects of the culture or religion under suspicion; it fails to appreciate what may simply be the innocuous desire to maintain one’s heritage and sense of identity in the face of a radically different, and often racist or intolerant, host-culture. In this way, such scholarship can appear just as intolerant as it claims the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha to be. I think, that on this point, Kim might agree. It is clearly this other extreme that Kim is so anxious to guard the Swaminarayan Sampraday

⁶³ Ibid., 457.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 458.

⁶⁵ Bochasawanasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha, “Announcements,” Bochasawanasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha, <http://www.swaminarayan.org/announcements/2005/akdmdvd.htm>, (accessed February 20, 2009).

from. However, in order to fairly and accurately discuss the tradition, we do not need to choose between condemning and supporting the tradition. Moving in one extreme direction does not cancel out the extremities on the other side.

IV. Why Not Take the Sanstha Entirely at its Word of Peace?

In the *Vachanamrut*,⁶⁶ Bhagwan Swaminarayan says, “one who lacks proper understanding cannot abandon his feelings of affection for his birthplace.”⁶⁷ This concern with place is important because the Swaminarayan Hindu religious tradition remains deeply tied to its birthplace in Gujarat. The Swaminarayan movement, in fact, has been explicitly linked to the creation of a Gujarati cultural identity, both in the diaspora and in Gujarat itself.⁶⁸ These connections have led some scholars to examine the role the Swaminarayan movement plays in political and social activity in Gujarat, as well as the influence the political and social atmosphere in Gujarat has on the Swaminarayan movement.

Though the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha claims to be apolitical, it frequently invites and engages Indian and Gujarati political leaders for festivals, celebrations, and ceremonies.⁶⁹ Political leaders are also quick to offer support to the Sanstha or to Pramukh Swami during times of crisis, such as during and after the 2002 attack on the Gandhinagar Akshardham.⁷⁰ Further, Pramukh Swami’s tolerance and attempts at inclusion are publicly displayed in online news

⁶⁶ The *Vachanamrut* is the primary holy text of the Swaminarayan Sampraday. It contains the teachings of Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

⁶⁷ *Vachanamrut*, Gadhada: I-37, 65

⁶⁸ For more on this, see Williams, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hinduism*, 31.

⁶⁹ Advani and Modi, among others, have been anointed at the Akshar Purushottam mandir (<http://www.swaminarayan.org/announcements/2005/akdmdvd.htm>, accessed April 14, 2009).

⁷⁰ Bochananwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha, “Temple Carnage,” Bochananwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha, <http://www.akshardham.com/gujarat/news/2002/akshardham/report.htm>, (accessed April 4, 2009).

accounts of his interviews with prominent non-Hindu or non-Indian leaders, such as his meeting in August 2002 with the President of India, who was then the Muslim politician H.E. Abdul Kalam.⁷¹ This meeting with Kalam came after another publicized event at which Pramukh Swami joined well-known BJP leader Narendra Modi, the Chief Minister of Gujarat, in blessing the Narmada River. It is not that Pramukh Swami joined another religious leader to do the blessing; more importantly, Pramukh Swami joined with a political leader. Both interactions may easily be seen as politicized events.

As Hanna Kim pointed out to me during a personal conversation, because of the prominence of both members of Sangh Parivar organizations and of Swaminarayan satsangis in Gujarat's major cities, satsangis living in Gujarat will necessarily be rubbing elbows with those engaged in right-wing politics.⁷² Kim's point was that interaction between Sangh Parivar organizations and the Sanstha should not be construed as cooperation between the two movements, but rather as an indication of their close quarters. Nevertheless, it is precisely the interaction, and even membership crossover, between the two groups that gives us cause to look more closely at the potential ways in which both movements influence, and are influenced by, each other.

With a long history of inter-religious violence, Gujarat has been called a "laboratory for Hindutva."⁷³ According to Vinay Lal, Gujarat is "one of the most reliable bastions of the BJP."⁷⁴

⁷¹ Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha, "H. E. Abdul Kalam, President of India, Meets Pramukh Swami Maharaj," Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha, <http://www.swaminarayan.org/news/2002/08/abdulkalam/index.htm>, (accessed February 15, 2009).

⁷² Personal conversation, Wabash College, Indiana, March 24, 2009.

⁷³ Vinay Lal, "On the Rails of Modernity: Communalism's Journey in India," in *Emergences* 12:2 (2002): 297-311, 302.

⁷⁴ Lal, "On the Rails of Modernity," 304; The BJP, which stands for the Bharatiya Janata Party, is the political wing of the Sangh Parivar.

Outbreaks of inter-religious violence, most commonly between Hindus and Muslims, but also between Hindus and Christians, have occurred regularly since the state formed in 1960.⁷⁵ With popular and active branches of the RSS, VHP, and Bajrang Dal all over the state, Gujarat is subject to the ever-present discourse and strategies of Hindu nationalism.

Interestingly, the nineteenth-century inception of the Swaminarayan Sampraday as a reform movement appears to mirror what Jaffrelot sees as the nineteenth-century inception of the Hindu nationalist movement as a reform movement. In much the same way that Lord Swaminarayan is seen by satsangis as having brought reform to Gujarat by founding the Sampraday on the “*Sanātana* [eternal] Hindu *Dharma* [religion],”⁷⁶ the nineteenth-century Hindu reformists who paved the way for Hindu nationalist ideology were also seeking to “[restore] to pristine purity their own traditions via eliminating later accretions.”⁷⁷ Such restoration was built upon what have become common themes within Hindu nationalist discourse: the purity of, again, the *sanātana* Hindu dharma, the victimization of Hindus and Hinduism at the hands of “the threatening Other,”⁷⁸ the essentialization of Hinduism to a few central tenets on one hand, and forcible inclusion of non-Hindus, such as Dalit and tribal groups, on the other. Vinayak Damodar Sarvarkar, with his *Who is a Hindu?* (1923), sets the stage for Hindu nationalist ideology by identifying Muslims and the West as enemies⁷⁹ and Hindu culture as pure and sacred. As we saw in the introduction to this essay, the Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha presentation of India as “ageless,” “timeless,” and “borderless” very

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha, “Introduction to the Prasthantrayi,” Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha, <http://www.baps.org/essays/2009/0802.htm>, (accessed April 19, 2009).

⁷⁷ Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalism*, 7.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 10.

⁷⁹ For Sarvarkar, a Hindu is someone for whom India is the sacred and ideal homeland. Muslims and Christians, with their holy land located outside of India, are not included.

much reflect common Hindu nationalist themes circulating widely in India, and especially in Gujarat.

These Hindu nationalist symbols are not simply being exported by Gujarat to the Gujarati diaspora. The direction of the movement of Swaminarayan faith and ideas is not just a one-way trajectory from Gujarat to the Gujarati diaspora communities around the globe. As Steven Vertovec points out with regard to Indian diaspora communities more generally, a significant amount of economic capital makes its way from the diaspora communities to the homeland through monetary remittances.⁸⁰ But, clearly, the exchange is not purely economic. Raymond Brady Williams uses Peggy Levitt's idea that this "capital" can be "social capital"⁸¹ to explain how "individuals, families, religious leaders, ideas, rituals, money, and all kinds of familial, economic and political negotiations move rapidly through the network in multidimensional communication."⁸² Understanding transnational social exchange in this way is important for understanding the role the diaspora has played in the development of the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha as well as the broader Swaminarayan Sampraday. The diaspora community's self-presentation in a non-welcoming environment could fuel exclusionist symbolism back home. Because the movement's growth has mostly taken place outside Gujarat, it is shaped considerably by such distinctive tensions of diasporic communities. The growth of the movement depends on its ability to respond to the needs of satsangis living outside of India.

⁸⁰ Steven Vertovec, "Transnationalism and Identity," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 27:4 (October 2001): 573-582; Vinay Lal cites Ashutosh Varshney when he suggests that Gujarati wealth from the diaspora fuels Hindu nationalist organizations in Gujarat (in "On the Rails of Modernity," 307).

⁸¹ Peggy Levitt, "Social Remittances: Migration Drive Local-Level Forms of Cultural Diffusion" in *International Migration Review* 32:4 (Winter 1998): 927-948.

⁸² Williams, "Migrations, Religions, Identities," 7.

The needs of satsangis living in Gujarati communities abroad are understandably different from satsangis in Gujarat. For Indians living outside India, religion becomes an important sphere to find meaning, a sense of community, and the rhetoric for self-representation to the broader host society. Maya Warrier describes how, in the diaspora, “Hindus often find themselves forced to explicitly articulate and explain the meaning and content of their religion and culture that, in their country of origin, they might have taken for granted.”⁸³ Very often, however, this process results in “defining, reifying, and stereotyping an “other” or “others” – a group or groups in opposition to whom the Hindu “self” is then defined.”⁸⁴

Identity formation and preservation in the diaspora often pave the way for what Prema Kurien calls “diasporic nationalism.”⁸⁵ As she explains, “multiculturalism often seems to exacerbate, rather than weaken, diasporic nationalism.” For Kurien, the “two faces of American Hinduism” are characterized by on one hand, the emphasis of “tolerance and pluralism of Hinduism,” and on the other, the use of “the discourse of multiculturalism” to “promote a militant Hindutva movement, replete with diatribes against Muslims, Christians, and secular Hindus in India and the United States.”⁸⁶ Because people present different faces in different contexts, the same Hindus that proudly proclaim their religion as the one truly tolerant religion may, in another context, espouse anti-Muslim sentiments or a desire for a Hindu homeland. Indeed, to refer again to Kurien, the Hindutva platform in the United States combines the discourse of the “model-minority” with the discourse of the “oppressed-minority.”⁸⁷

⁸³ Maya Warrier, “Diaspora,” *Studying Hinduism: Key Concepts and Methods*, ed. Sushil Mittal and Gene Thursby (London: Routledge, 2008).

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Kurien, “Multiculturalism, Religion, and Diasporic Nationalism.”

⁸⁶ Kurien, *A Place at the Multicultural Table*, 160.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

In the same way that Sarvarkar views the West and Islam as the “other” and as a threat to the purity of the Hindu tradition, the Gujarati diaspora views as a threat the broader host society. Because the Sanstha views Western culture as particularly negative, polluting, immoral, with its pre-marital sex, alcohol consumption, and violence,⁸⁸ parents fear their children’s corruption by such a society.⁸⁹ The Gujarati communities in the diaspora seem unified by an “inability” or an “unwillingness” to fully assimilate into their host countries—a unity which is visibly expressed by the construction of the tradition’s trademark mandirs. To avoid assimilation, Gujaratis living abroad take very conscious and visible steps to preserve their culture purity through temple building. As the Chicago Akshar Purushottam Sanstha Mandir desk employees are quick to point out to visitors, all the pieces of the Chicago Mandir were hand-carved in Gujarat to imitate the original, and therefore ideal, Swaminarayan temples in Gujarat. These enormous pieces of stone were then shipped to Bartlett, where they were assembled.⁹⁰ These construction techniques, which cost millions of dollars, are demonstrative of the lengths the community goes to in order to maintain cultural and religious purity and authenticity.

Iris Kalka’s ethnographic research on British and East African Gujarati communities further evidences both an inability and an unwillingness to integrate. As Kalka explains, the dominant opinion among Gujaratis outside India is both that they will not be fully accepted by their host country and that the host country’s culture is “polluting” and “corrupting.”⁹¹ Embedded in the negative views of host country’s culture are the corresponding ideas that Gujarati culture is pure and non-corrupting.

⁸⁸ Mukundcharandas, *Vachanamrut Handbook*, 122.

⁸⁹ Vertovec, “Transnationalism and Identity.”

⁹⁰ Personal interview, November 30, 2008.

⁹¹ Iris Kalka, “Attachment to the Mother Country—Image and Reality,” *Ethnic Groups* 8:4 (1990): 249-264, 260.

The concern about the polluting nature of the host countries often appears explicitly in the advice the touring Akshar Purushottam Sanstha leaders give to the satsangis abroad. Williams recounts part of a lecture given by a sadhu to American satsangis at the Madison Square Garden, in which the sadhu provides warning against assimilating too much with the “materialism and immorality” of the American culture.⁹² According to Williams, “meetings where Gujarati language, food, music, and rituals are used form the first bulwark outside the home against the considerable pressures of the host society and culture.”⁹³ Satsangis are also discouraged from watching TV programs or movies which may contain images of people violating any of the satsangis’ vows, from spending too much time away from the community, and even from eating out at restaurants because of the potential for eggs, meat, onions or garlic to be used. By deliberately removing themselves almost entirely from the host society and constructing a Gujarati experience to the greatest extent possible, they can avoid the experiences of “marginality” and insecurity.⁹⁴

The Gujarati Hindu diaspora in the United States is faced, then, with a dual challenge both to form an image of India and Hinduism for the non-Indian and non-Hindu American public, and to inculcate the second-generation Gujarati-American’s pride in her cultural heritage. Regarding the former challenge, Kurien points to multiculturalism, which, she argues, “demands the construction of a *public* ethnic identity, as opposed to a purely private one” and, therefore, the “construction of a monocultural homeland in order to be part of a multicultural society.”⁹⁵

⁹² Williams, *Religions of Immigrants from India and Pakistan*, 183.

⁹³ *Ibid.*; Williams, of course, sees this positively, as an unavoidable reaction to the pressures of living in an unfamiliar place, but the exclusionism this (perhaps inadvertently) creates paves the way for more hardline Hindu chauvinism.

⁹⁴ Mukta, “The Public Face of Hindu Nationalism,” 461; Vertovec, “Three Meanings of Diaspora,” 283.

⁹⁵ Kurien, “Multiculturalism, Religion, and Diasporic Nationalism,” 371, italics original.

Within this vein of self-representation, the Sanstha has become increasingly conscious of its public discourse. Part of promoting the Swaminarayan movement, Gujarati culture, and Hinduism more broadly to non-Gujaratis and non-Hindus includes emphasizing the elements of each that outsiders would take to be positive—namely, service, tolerance, peace, faith, and purity of conduct.⁹⁶ The second challenge is important for immigrant parents to ensure their children do not resent their cultural heritage or feel pressured to assimilate into what they see as the immoral culture of the West.

By way of meeting these challenges, the non-Gujarati visitor to the Chicago Akshar Purushottam Sanstha Mandir is immediately ushered toward the “The Exhibition.” The long hallway of murals that makes up the exhibition feature information on “Glorious India”: India’s geography, flora and fauna, history, and Hindu religion, as well as the country’s contribution to science, medicine, and mathematics. The panel that is particularly striking contains a concrete, minimum-requirements sort of definition of who is a Hindu. According the panel, “A Hindu is”:

One who has faith in the Vedas;

One who accepts ‘OM’;

One who believes in rebirth, moksha, and murti puja;

One who serves the cow with love;

And one whose mind is adverse to violence.

Even though Hinduism has never had a monolithic set of beliefs, here is an attempt to universalize and codify Hindu belief. This represents the Swaminarayan commitment to what the movement sees as the fundamentals of Hinduism, as well as to its place as part of an essentialized vision of India. Its deliberate return to the *Vedas* (the most ancient Hindu texts)

⁹⁶ Mujundcharandas, *Vachanamrut Handbook*, 121-135.

correlates with a tendency in religious fundamentalism to “return” to a purer, more ancient form of the religion. The *Vachanamrut Handbook* proudly explains that Sahajanand Swami’s success lay in unifying Gujarati Hindus under the ancient dharma. The Swaminarayan Sampraday refers to this unification as the establishment of the *Ekantik* (Single) *Dharma*, which Mujundcharandas describes as the “composite dharma of *dharma* (right conduct), *jnan* (knowledge), *vairagya* (detachment from materialism) and *bhakti* (devotion).”⁹⁷ Satsangis believe this is the ultimate, most essential dharma.

The Exhibit’s panels on “Glorious India” and Gujarat proudly display India’s spiritual, mathematical, and scientific contributions to the world and its ancient history. These panels are illustrative of a tendency that exists within diasporic communities. According to Martin Baumann, “most often the real or imagined land of origin is bestowed with qualities such as ‘purity’ and ‘religious authenticity.’”⁹⁸ This is certainly the case for the Swaminarayan Sampraday, which is made clear by the passage in the *Vachanamrut*, in which Bhagwan Swaminarayan explains that “only after receiving a human birth in Bharat-khand [India] can one attain liberation.”⁹⁹ For the Gujarati-American, commitment to the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha becomes the most convenient and pure method for both the construction of a public identity and the preservation of her child’s heritage. This diaspora tendency, though ostensibly benign, also implicitly identifies India with Hinduism, at the exclusion of India’s many other religious groups. Hindu nationalism, both at home and abroad, makes the same identification.

⁹⁷ Mujundcharandas, *Vachanamrut Handbook*, 13, 287.

⁹⁸ Martin Baumann, “Conceptualizing Diaspora: The Preservation of Religious Identity in Foreign Parts, Exemplified by Hindu Communities Outside of India,” in *Temenos* 31 (1995): 19-35, 22.

⁹⁹ *Vachanamrut*, Bhugol-khagol: 2.

In an attempt to present an essentialized face of India to the host society, many diaspora communities, either deliberately or unintentionally, equate a Hindu identity with an Indian identity. Indeed, many of the same tensions that give rise to the Gujarati diaspora's emphasis on cultural preservation and an essentialized presentation of Hinduism also give rise to the growing Hindu nationalist movement in the United States and elsewhere. In the United States' spirit of multiculturalism, "Hindu Nationalist organizations in the United States often subdue their political rhetoric, and concentrate on issues of cultural reproduction, presenting themselves as well-meaning guardians of Hindu values."¹⁰⁰ Hindu nationalism puts on a mask of the more benign "Indian pride." In the same way, by focusing on the preservation of culture and dharma, the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha can remain insulated from accusations of racism, politicization, or non-assimilation, and instead be celebrated for their unique contribution to the American multicultural quilt.

There are important parallels between the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha's fundamentalist rhetoric and the Hindu right's rhetoric of Hindutva. The global Hindu nationalist discourses reflecting distinctions "in terms of inside/outside, citizen/alien, and self/other"¹⁰¹ have similar expressions in the Swaminarayan tradition, through the primary duality of purity versus impurity discussed above. Moreover, both movements actively represent India as the ideal homeland of the Hindus. While "showcasing" Hinduism to the global public, the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha is engaged in "showcasing" India to the global public.¹⁰² This, either deliberately or inadvertently, identifies India with Hinduism and Indian pride with Hindu pride. We are again reminded of a primary goal of Hindu nationalism, which we saw earlier was to promote the

¹⁰⁰ Quote from Chaturvedi, "Diaspora in India's Geopolitical Visions," 165, who makes explicit reference to Kurien.

¹⁰¹ Chaturvedi, "Diaspora in India's Political Visions," 143.

¹⁰² See note 14.

definition of Indian culture as Hindu culture.¹⁰³ The Hindu nationalist slogan, “Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan” calls for the creation of a Hindu India. We have already seen the Swaminarayan emphasis on India as the true homeland, with most mandirs featuring their own panels on “Glorious India” and the Vachanamrut backing the idea that “only in Bharat-khand can one attain liberation.”¹⁰⁴ Further, each movement has attempted to essentialize Hinduism into what they each see as the few fundamental beliefs. The exhibition of the Akshar Purushottam Mandir defines a Hindu by her belief in Om and moksha and commitment to the Vedas, murti puja, nonviolence, and serving the cow. In almost the same way, Hindu Nationalist organizations promote a fundamentalist revitalization of the “central tenets” of what they call the *sanatana dharma* (eternal faith).¹⁰⁵ Hindu fundamentalism plays a large role in the propagation of both movements.

The parallel discourse should hardly come as a surprise, given the Sampraday’s Gujarati origin. Still, even in Gujarat, the Swaminarayan Sampraday is careful to keep a politically correct distance from the Hindu nationalist agenda. Though, as discussed previously, Mukta goes so far as to associate Pramukh Swami with the “public face of Hindu Nationalism,”¹⁰⁶ I argue that it is publicly that the distance is the most carefully maintained. The Swaminarayan holy texts and Pramukh Swami’s official statements do not disparage Islam or the United States, and do not take a political stand on issues related to India. Instead, these publications promote the tolerance and acceptance of all people. A large United States flag waves outside the Chicago Akshar Purushottam Mandir.

¹⁰³ See note 22.

¹⁰⁴ See n. 94.

¹⁰⁵ Kurien, “Multiculturalism, Religion, and Diasporic Nationalism,” 370-374.

¹⁰⁶ The title of Mukta’s article, “The Public Face of Hindu Nationalism.”

At this point, a parallel example may help us understand the position of the Akshar Purushottam Santha. According to Jaffrelot, an awkwardly drawn line between a more moderate political strategy and a more aggressive, “radical” political strategy has shaped the relationship between Sangh Parivar member organizations as well as the development of Hindutva politics. Jaffrelot writes of this divide:

The BJP leaders consider that any return to a radical brand of Hindu nationalist politics will alienate its allies and postpone sine die its comeback to the helm of political affairs in the country. The RSS and VHP leaders assume that the BJP lost the 2004 elections because the Vajpayee government had disappointed too many Hindus. They fear that any further dilution of the ideology of the party would widen the gap between the BJP and the rest of the Sangh Parivar.¹⁰⁷

The predicament of the BJP – negotiating a balance between a more moderate approach and more fundamentalist approach – seems to be analogous to the predicament of many Hindu religious organizations in India, including the Swaminarayan Sampraday. The BJP wants to simultaneously retain those followers who are ideologically aligned with the RSS and VHP as well as those who are looking for an alternative to the Congress Party, including, sometimes, non-Hindus. Further, as a political party and not a cultural organization, the BJP has an added need to present an acceptable (i.e., tolerant, non-aggressive) face for international politics.¹⁰⁸

These discrepancies in strategy and ideology remind us that organizations, like people, are multi-faceted and their overt ideologies may obscure contradictory attitudes. The contradictory elements, however, do not cancel each other out. Instead, they alert us, once again,

¹⁰⁷ Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalism*, 23.

¹⁰⁸ For more on the split in the Sangh Parivar and the political and ideological development of the BJP, see Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalism*, 19-25.

to the various pressures an organization must respond to, and the various contexts in which an organization must work. The Hindutva movement itself has from its beginning reminded the world that “tolerance and forgiveness are characteristics of the Hindu society,”¹⁰⁹ while calling for Hindus to rise up against Muslims and Christians.

We are again reminded of Hatcher’s conception of the “good fruit” and “sour fruit” that any one discourse, history, organization, person, ideology, etc. may proffer.¹¹⁰ The apparent contradictions in the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha’s public presentation should not necessarily be taken to mean that the official discourse of peace and tolerance is contrived or false. It would be better taken as a signal to the difficult position a modern Hindu reform movement must be in as it attempts to balance the current right wing Hindu political culture in Gujarat,¹¹¹ as well as the conservative political attitudes of many satsangis, with the emphasis on multi-culturalism, cultural heritage and ethnic and religious tolerance it must promote in order to have success as a transnational movement.

Still, while admitting the “good fruit,” our balancing act upon the razor’s edge must allow us to examine parallel ideologies of Hindu nationalism and Swaminarayan fundamentalism. It appears that these mutually affect and corroborate the other and both likely affect individual Swaminarayan satsangis at an unofficial level. If a Swaminarayan satsangi is already committed, through her subscription to the Swaminarayan theology and ideology, to the resisting of the “other,” to the essentialization and standardization of Hinduism, and to the notion of India as the Hindu holy land, then it would not be a difficult move for her to shift these beliefs onto her

¹⁰⁹ Madan Mohan Malaviya, “Presidential Address at a Hindu Mahasabha Meeting (1923),” trans. in Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalism*, 64.

¹¹⁰ Hatcher, *Eclecticism and Modern Hindu Discourse*, 165.

¹¹¹ Gujarat has been called a “hotbed” for Hindu nationalism.

political views. As many others have noted,¹¹² this same process of identity creation among Hindus in the diaspora that has been so influential in shaping the Swaminarayan movement, has also led many Hindus to join what tend to be highly politicized, right-wing Hindu cultural groups such as the VHPA and the HSS. The simultaneous rise in Gujarat and the U.S. of both Hindu nationalism and the Swaminarayan movement is not a strange coincidence. Similar tensions in Gujarat (namely colonialism and secularization) gave rise to both movements, and similar tensions function to help popularize both movements today in both Gujarat and the “Hindu diaspora.”

Both movements are driven in part by resistance to secularization and what they see as debased religious practices. Williams describes the prevailing perception among Swaminarayan satsangis that Swaminarayan reform has, in the “face of increasing secularization and the weakening of religious devotion,” “provided a revitalization of sacred person, sacred space and sacred time.”¹¹³ The *Vachanamrut Handbook*’s account of the history of the Swaminarayan movement substantiates Williams’ description. According to the Handbook, “during political upheaval, social insecurity and religious darkness, people become more prone to superstition and blind faith. Nineteenth century India witnessed just such darkness.”¹¹⁴ Sarvarkar’s “history” of India in *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* portrays the story of a nation whose times of “peace and plenty” were interrupted by “century after century” of “ghastly conflict” at the hands of Islamic foreign invaders.¹¹⁵ Again, the Swaminarayan symbols and the Hindu nationalist symbols

¹¹² See, for example, Arjun Appadurai, Steven Vertovec, and Prema Kurien.

¹¹³ Williams, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hinduism*, 101.

¹¹⁴ Mukundcharandas, *Vachanamrut Handbook*, 36.

¹¹⁵ Sarvarkar, *Who is a Hindu? (excerpt)*, in *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader*, ed. Christophe Jaffrelot (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 91-93.

provide a parallel conception of Hinduism as India's eternal, authentic, and therefore essential faith.

V. The Unofficial Connections

If it were only for shared rhetoric and the dynamics of diaspora representation, it might prove easy to absolve the Sanstha from any unintended connections. However, there is further evidence to consider. A part of the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha's developmental service activities, the Sanstha's primary goal for their "Tribal Uplift" mission is to "free from addictions and *superstitions*" the tribal people living in the Dangs.¹¹⁶ Since 1972, the Sanstha has built over 1, 550 "Tribal Uplift Centers."¹¹⁷ Led, of course, by Pramukh Swami, who has personally reached out to teach tribals, the Sanstha is engaged with their "moral and spiritual upliftment." In one of Pramukh Swami's blessings to a group of *adivasi* (tribal) people, he said, "Paramatma [the second divine principle] is the *adi* (first) of all. His *vas* is in you (He resides in you). And you reside near him; therefore, you are *adivasi*."¹¹⁸

Though the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha also emphasizes its de-addiction drives and medical assistance in the Dangs, there is a clear element of "spiritual help." According to Satyakam Joshi, the Sanstha's work in the Dangs may be seen as partly indicative of the movement's concern with Christian missionary activity, which is also a chief concern of

¹¹⁶ The Dangs is a southeastern region of Gujarat that has high rates of poverty. Communities considered by the government to be scheduled tribes and castes are the primary inhabitants of the Dangs.

¹¹⁷ Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha, "Tribal Upliftment," Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha, <http://www.swaminarayan.org/activities/tribal/tribalupliftment.htm>, (accessed April 1, 2009), emphasis mine.

¹¹⁸ Sadhu Bhadreshdas, "A Glance at the Ishavasya Upanisad" in *Swaminarayan Bliss* 32:2, trans. Swami Paramvivekdas (February 2009): 7-13, 9.

organizations under the Sangh Parivar umbrella. In fact, according to Joshi, “the Swaminarayan sect has become active in the Dangs as a direct result of the conversions to Christianity, and very recently at that.”¹¹⁹

Joshi points to Purshotam Prakashdas Swami (P P Swami) as the primary sadhu who is active in activities in the Dangs. Joshi recounts an interview between him and Purshotam Prakashdas Swami, during which Purshotam Prakashdas Swami said:

The Christian missionaries have drawn their mark in the Dangs and we do not want to erase this mark, rather we would like to draw a bigger mark through our own developmental activities. Once our mark becomes bigger, that of the missionaries will automatically become smaller. The need of the hour is for Hindu organisations to change their style of mobilising people and adopt more of a ‘Church’ style. This means Hindu organisations must adopt the methods of Christian missionaries. Then and then only one can combat the issue of conversion.¹²⁰

These sentiments expressed by Purshotam Prakashdas Swami indicate his view that Christian conversion is a problem that requires the attention of the Sanstha. Purshotam Prakashdas Swami says later in the interview that he set up a trust called “Prayosha Pratisthan” to “stop these conversions [to Christianity].”¹²¹ The Sanstha thereby supports activities that seem to have been

¹¹⁹ Satyakam Joshi, “Tribals, Missionaries and Sadhus: Understanding Violence in the Dangs,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 34:37 (September 1999): 2667-2675, 2671.

¹²⁰ Purshotam Prakashdas Swami, quoted in Joshi, “Tribals, Missionaries and Sadhus,” 2671.

¹²¹ Ibid.

started out of a concern for Christian conversions in the Dangs. In Gujarat, the BJP, the VHP and the Bajrang Dal have all also been associated with such “re-conversion” activities.¹²²

The shared concerns are sometimes not the only thing the Hindu nationalist groups share with the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha: On September 15th, 1998, the Bajrang Dal (the militant youth wing of the VHP), held a “programme” at the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha mandir near Muninagar Station, in Division-South Karnavati in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. The programme was designed to present to the public the following objectives of the Bajrang Dal:

- ◆ To Protect country i.e. mother India
- ◆ To raise a loud voice against people ignoring Hindu Sabha
- ◆ To protect religion, culture
- ◆ To work for protection of Hindu women (sister & daughter)
- ◆ To fight against anti-national sentiments.
- ◆ To go for crusade against cow-slaughter
- ◆ People’s awareness drive against trapping of Hindu girls by Muslims and anti-national activities by Christian missionaries
- ◆ Bajrang Dal means national power-Hindu Power.¹²³

As Hanna Kim pointed out to me in the conversation I cited earlier, allowing the Bajrang Dal to use the space at the Akshar Purushottam mandir for such an event does not necessarily mean the Sanstha’s complicity in Bajrang Dal activities. This may well be true. Regardless, I think it does mean that the satsang, at least at this mandir, is not entirely antithetical to the militancy or

¹²² See Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalism*, 10; the National Alliance of Women’s *Hindu Jago, Christy Bhago!: Violence in Gujarat, Test Case for a Larger Fundamentalist Agenda*; or Joshi, “Tribals, Missionaries and Sadhus,” 2672.

¹²³ National Alliance of Women, *Hindu Jago, Christy Bhago!*, 45; Text taken verbatim from source.

mission of the Bajrang Dal. I think it is reasonable to guess that if a militant Islamic group asked to use a space at the mandir for a rally, it would be denied permission.

Finally, in *Perspectives: Inspiring Essays on Life*, a book published by the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha's publishing house, Swaminarayan Aksharpath, Akshar Purushottam Sanstha sadhus provide advice on a variety of topics from the "Brevity of Time" to "Why Bad Things Happen to Good People."¹²⁴ Of particular interest to our topic are the two final essays, "War and Anti-War" and "Maturity: The Solution to World Strife."¹²⁵ Though the first essay is, as might be expected, about the evils of war, it also justifies war in certain contexts. Following a number of statistics about how many people have been killed by war, and directly preceding a touching anecdote about a woman widowed by war, the author argues, "the fact is, war and killing in certain circumstances sometimes becomes inescapable—such as in India's own historical epics of the Ramayan and Mahabharat *dharmayudhs* [norms of dharma]. Such wars are a lesser evil than terrorism, tyranny and despotism. And they are a necessity to uproot them." Drawing upon India's ancient literature for legitimization, the author goes on to motivate his readers:

So let all India and every other justice-craving people in the world unite and arise in a single leap to wipe out this menace of terrorism and rid the earth of every terrorist's shadow. Let all freedom loving people stand by each other and brace themselves with warrior-like courage for whatever eventuality we may all have

¹²⁴ BAPS Sadhus, *Perspectives: Inspiring Essays on Life* (Ahmedabad: Swaminarayan Aksharpath: 2003), 22-25, 145-150.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 230-235.

to soon confront. Let all mothers and fathers, children and friends determine not to shed a single tear during any period of this global crisis.¹²⁶

This is hardly a message of peace and tolerance. For a Hindu audience, there is no doubt as to whom the word “terrorists” refers. The anecdote following this call to action describes a woman whose husband was killed in the Kargil conflict, one dimension of an ongoing war between India and Pakistan over Kashmir. According to the story in the essay, the woman’s young son tried to stop her tears saying, “Mom, please don’t cry. Daddy died for a good cause.” The sadhu’s message to “unite and rise” is reminiscent of Hindu reformer, Swami Vivekananda’s coined phrase, “Arise, Awake! And stop not until the goal is reached!,” which the Hindu nationalist movement uses as a slogan to work for a Hindu India.¹²⁷

Conclusion

What we see here is a transnational movement that officially promotes peace, and for which “peace” has become part of their self-representation in the diaspora, that contains undercurrents of intolerance and fundamentalism. Pramukh Swami, as the Sanstha’s primary spokesperson, appears to be negotiating a difficult global space between the prevailing political and social culture in Gujarat and prevailing liberal Western ideas of secularism, tolerance, and multi-culturalism. We can see the difficulty of this negotiation in the tension between the Sanstha’s official discourse of peace and an unofficial rhetoric that leans toward intolerance, fundamentalism, and a push for a Hindu India. While the movement’s position as a global

¹²⁶ Ibid., 231-232.

¹²⁷ Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America, “Membership Management System,” Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America, <http://ess.vhp-america.org/mms/default.php>, (accessed April 15, 2009).

religion helps us to understand how hard-line Hindu undercurrents may arise in both the diaspora and at home, it should not absolve the Sanstha of responsibility.

Nussbaum's treatment of the sect may not be completely fair, but she makes a good point when she remarks that "the Swaminarayan sect's tremendous wealth and burgeoning influence suggest that it could play a more active role than it has as yet in promoting interfaith respect and the condemnation of politicians who do not exemplify its own highest values." Truly, Pramukh Swami's immense power and the Sanstha's amazing organizational skills could have a positive influence in Gujarat and elsewhere. Unfortunately, Pramukh Swami's statements of peace are currently being undercut by unofficial, and perhaps unintentional, messages the Sanstha currently sends through its informal rhetoric, symbolism, and controversial activities. Still, it is important to keep in mind that the Sanstha's non-peaceful unofficial rhetoric, symbolism and activities do not necessarily mean that the Sanstha is deliberately masking Hindu militancy with their official presentation of peace and tolerance. Instead, we may take this as yet another example of how, due to the complexity of religious organizations, genuinely benign objectives can have unintended consequences.

When Swami Vivekananda derived from the Upanisads his famous expression "Arise, awake! And stop not until the goal is reached!" the VHP would not be born for over half of a century. At the time he coined it, the "goal" was a free India, not a Hindu India. Since, however, its adoption by the VHP, the phrase has taken on an entirely new meaning. Regardless of the original intention, the phrase now carries Hindu nationalist connotations of the battle for a Hindu India. Similarly, Pramukh Swami's saffron-colored robes may be seen as a benign

commitment to the Hindu tradition, but they may also be interpreted as a nod in the direction of what has been increasingly referred to as the “saffron-clad” Hindu Nationalist movement.¹²⁸

Whereas we might be tempted to argue for one interpretation over another, I argue that accurate scholarship should allow for the simultaneous validity of more than one interpretation. As we have seen, the complexity of social organizations makes possible the existence of contradictory compulsions and actions within a single organization, such as the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha.

¹²⁸ Many scholars now see the saffron robe as a symbol of the Hindu Nationalist movement. See, for instance, Thomas Blom Hansen, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

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