

New New Religions in North America: The Swaminarayan Family of Religions

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The Swaminarayan movement holds a particular status within the modern development of religion in India. This reformist Hindu movement initially appeared in the Indian state of Gujarat in the early nineteenth century as a new religious sect within the larger milieu of Krishna-oriented Vaishnava Hinduism.¹ While plainly a new religious thrust which founded its own new temples and made significant innovations on the tradition, it emerged just as Britain was assuming control of India and prior to the massive arrival of Christian missionaries through the middle of the century. As such, it preceded the India-wide response to the spread of Christianity generally termed the Hindu Renaissance and the Renaissance's leadership to search out the essence of Hinduism and move the religion into a confrontation with the modern world and certainly prior to the many guru-led spiritual movements that became so important in introducing Western believers to Hinduism in the last half of the twentieth century.²

Traditional Hinduism, much like Medieval Catholicism in the West, had an all pervasive presence in India. Centered on its many temples which served as local homes to the many deities who received worship and acknowledgement, its life was punctuated with a cycle of holidays, the more important mobilizing the whole community in their administration and celebration. Three major communities of Hinduism (analogous to the Eastern Orthodox, the Western Catholic, and the Protestant communities of Christianity) emerged—Vaishnaism focused on the god Vishnu, Saivism focused on Siva, and Goddess worship focused on a female deity venerated variously as Devi, Durga, Kali, or Lakshmi (though a variety of other names appear). Each of the three communities had its own temples that housed its deities and a distinctive festival cycle with unique holy days and major celebrations.

¹ This study emerged while working on the 2010 census of the Hindu community conducted by the Institute for the Study of American Religion in collusion with my colleague Constance A. Jones. It was during this study that I became acutely aware that all of the variant Swaminarayan groups had been transferred to the West and that at least three of them had a national presence. I am grateful to Roger Finke and the Association of Religious Data Archives, and ultimately the Templeton Foundation, for their support of the census project and ultimately this additional research.

² For a general overview and history of the Swaminarayan movement, see H. T. Dave, *Life and Philosophy of Lord Swaminarayan 1781-1830*. Ed. by Leslie Shepherd (Amdavad, India: Swaminarayan Aksharpath, 1996) and Hanna Hea-Sun Kim, *Being Swaminarayan: The Ontology and Significance in the Construction of a Gujarati Diaspora* (New York: Columbia, Ph.D. dissertation, 2000). I have, however, as the best check on my own research, especially relied on the book by Raymond B. Williams, *A New Face of Hinduism: The Swaminarayan Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) which I read many years ago and which is now available in a new revised and updated edition as: *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hinduism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

Among Vaishnava devotees, Vishnu is believed to have incarnated in the world on a number of occasions. By far the most popular of those incarnations was as Krishna who was born in Mathura and according to the ancient texts lived in various locations across northern India. Among the sacred sites devoted to the deity is Dwarka in Western Gujarat, which according to the stories was the capital of Krishna's kingdom and the site from which he left for the great battle of Kurukshetra which occasioned his famous conversation with Arjuna recorded in the Bhagavad Gita. By the end of the eighteenth century, Krishna worship was strongly established across northern India from Bengal to Gujarat.

The Swaminarayan Movement grew out of the movement begun around Shree Sahajanand Swami (1781-1830), a monk who would become revered toward the end of his life as Lord Swaminarayan. From the days of his childhood in the state of Uttar Pradesh in north central India, Sahajanand manifested an inclination to the religious life. When he was eleven, his parents died and he adopted the life of a renunciate. The remainder of his life became a spiritual pilgrimage. He spent his teen years wandering through northern India, the last year of which was spent in the ashram of Sri Ramananda Swami (b.1739), a prominent Vaishnava teacher. Ramananda's most prominent disciple and heir apparent, Muktananda Swami, came to believe that the pious Sahajanand was, in fact, an incarnation of Krishna. Subsequently, when Ramananda died, Muktananda took the lead in naming Sahajanand as his successor and under the name Ramananda had given him, Swami Narain, this relatively new addition to the community assumed leadership of the largest group of Ramananda's devotees, who thus became the original core of the Swaminarayan movement. He was also from this time (1802), publicly revered as an incarnation of Krishna.

As he assumed leadership of the movement, several issues quickly came to the fore. Swaminarayan had, for example, been a strict, even extreme, renunciate. He owned nothing and in keeping his vow of celibacy refused to have any contact or dealing with females. But immediately upon recognizing their new leader, Ramananda's followers showered with gifts, and he found that he would have to make at least some modest accommodations to acknowledge his devoted female and wealthy male followers. As an incarnation of Krishna, he received worship from his followers, many of whom reported entering a state of blissful trance in his presence.

In spite of the vast amount of material on Sahajanand's life and work, including his own writings, reconstructing his life is difficult if not impossible. While we know much of what he did and taught, putting dates to his activities, ordering the events in his life along a time line, and separating real occurrences from apocryphal tales remains problematic. We do know he placed a great emphasis on both personal and social morality and imposed a strict ethical code on his followers and led efforts at social reform, most notably attacking the practice of sati, in which recent widows committed suicide by immolation on their late husband's funeral pyre. Though a relatively rare phenomenon, with most cases being reported in Bengal on the other side of India from where Swaminarayan resided, the practice was indicative of the low esteem granted widows in

some parts of Indian culture. Swaminarayan not only campaigned against the practice of sati (which he equated with common suicide), he moved to create a special place for widows who chose to live their life in devotion to Krishna. They would not be formally initiated into a nun's role, but they were allowed to shave their hair, don special clothing, and receive the acknowledgement of the community for their ascetic choice.³ Today, the movement credits their founder with having "successfully eradicated sati from most areas of Gujarat."⁴ He also moved against the practice of infanticide, there being several sub-groups in Gujarat who were accused of killing their female infants in order to avoid the dowry payments that would be incurred at the time of their later marriage. Swaminarayan's contemporary followers also credit their founder with helping to eradicate this practice across Gujarat.⁵

The ethical system assembled by Sahajanand, and written down in his major writing, the *Shikshapatri*, set the reformist tone of what otherwise would have simply been another variant Krishna devotional (*bhakti*) movement.⁶ The reformist tendencies began with the five vows which all devotees took, which required them to refrain from stealing, committing adultery, eating meat, partaking of intoxicants, and receiving food or water from "someone from whom one is not allowed to under the guidelines of the caste system." Those who went on to become ascetics took additional vows that included strict separation from members of the opposite sex and a renunciation of all worldly possessions.

Anticipating changes of the nature of the ascetic life, changes that would become widespread during in the Hindu Renaissance, Swaminarayan informed the renunciates that their vows did not place them above manual labor and active service to the community. He ordered the sadhus into the towns across Gujarat, there to work among the people and to engage in activities that benefited the community. Most remembered throughout Gujarat are the sadhus who dug wells and water reservoirs, repaired roads, and constructed new living quarters. The ascetics also were mobilized to build the Swaminarayan temples. During the several famines that occurred in Gujarat during Swaminarayan's life, the ascetics organized food distribution in those areas hardest hit. Estimates vary, but the movements reached several hundred thousand prior to Swaminarayan's death in 1830.

Organizing the Movement

In the early years of the movement, Swaminarayan operated as a charismatic leader with an assumed divine status and made all the major decisions relative to belief and practice,

³ See the lengthy discussion of the status and role of women in general and widows in particular in Shree Swaminarayan Vijaytetram, *Shikshapatri* (Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India: Shri Swaminarayan Mandir/London: International Swaminarayan Satsang Organization, 2000) 238-257.

⁴ Sadhu Mukuncharandas. *Lord Swaminarayan: An Introduction* (Amdavad, India: Swaminarayan Aksharpath, 1999) 22. The theme of Swaminarayan's opposition to the practice of sati had been a persistent theme in biographies and other books published by the movement.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Among several English editions, the one cited above is published especially for distribution in the West.

policies, and administration. While Swaminarayan lived he would appoint the sadhus (the monks who had taken renunciate vows) to head the various temples, but also named lay temple administrators who, unlike the sadhus, could handle money and interact with female members. The gradual separation of spiritual and temporal authority in the group led to the most important decisions relative to the succession of authority at the time of Swaminarayan's death.

In 1826, Swaminarayan turned to his own family and his two brothers, Ramapratap and Ichcharama, both of whom had married and fathered children, and adopted one of their sons. He then installed them as *acharyas* (or preceptors) to head the movement. At this time he divided Gujarat into two areas, beginning at Dwarka and extending eastward toward Bengal. Ayodhyaprasad, Ramapratap's son, was appointed the acharya of the NarNarayan Dev Gadi, or Northern division,⁷ based in Ahmedabad, whilst Raghuveer, the son of Ichcharama, became the acharya of the LaxmiNarayan Dev Gadi, or Southern division, based in Vadtal.⁸ Each jurisdiction, sometimes compared to a Christian diocese, contained a large temple in their headquarters city and several additional temples constructed during Swaminarayan's lifetime. The six temples that were constructed during Swaminarayan's earthly life have become the most sacred sites of the movement.

The two jurisdictions worked quite well through the nineteenth century. Each lay acharya administered the work in his half of Gujarat, and each respected the territory of the other. Disciples, of course, felt free to make pilgrimages to all of the temples throughout the country. It was also the case that the acharyas, while primarily temporal leaders, had been assigned several essential spiritual functions, most notably the final act of installation of deity statues in a new temple and the reinstallation of the deities in older temples following major renovation. The acharyas also initiated candidates into the ascetic life as sadhus. Though the acharya was expected to present an exemplary example to followers, they lived as married householders.

Swaminarayan thus left the movement with a bifurcated authority system. Spiritual authority was largely given to the *sadhus*, the renunciates, were expected to lead a holy life, most notably manifest by their vows of poverty to the point of not even handling money, and celibacy which included the additional restriction of not having even the slightest contact with females. Temporal authority fell entirely to the acharyas, selected from members of Swaminarayan's own family, and the authority and power of the acharya grew through the century as new issues arose and as the movement grew and the members became more affluent. Both acharyas grew wealthy and between them controlled all of the movement's property. Though expected to be detached from the wealth they acquired, the amount they controlled and used left them open to charges of corruption. In addition, the temporal duties mingled with some of the essential spiritual tasks. After seeing to the initiation ceremonies for new sadhus, for example, they were

⁷ The Northern group's webpage may be found at <http://www.swaminarayan.info/default.asp>.

⁸ Cf. *Shree Vadtal Dham: The Supreme Pilgrim Abode of Swaminarayan Fellowship* (Vadtal, Gujarat, India; Shri Swaminarayan Temple, n.d.). The Southern Group's webpage is found at <http://www.vadtalmandir.org/>.

expected to pay for their mundane needs of food, clothing, and shelter. He also oversaw the various educational and charitable services delivered by the movement. Perceptions that an acharya was not living up to the high standards that had been set for him or was neglecting his duties could become a crisis moment for the movement as a whole, and prepare the way for schism.

Swaminarayan Divided

Trouble developed within the Swaminarayan movement early in the twentieth century. In 1899 the Southern division at Vadtal had installed Lakshmiprasad as its new acharya. Within a few years, however, it became evident that he was not living up to his role. Unable to resolve the issue otherwise, in 1906 an assemblage of leaders, both sadhus and householders, formally disposed him. By this time, there had arisen in the Vadtal temple a sadhu, Swami Yagnapurushdas (1865-1951), later known as Shastri Maharaj. These events followed on the heels of a succession dispute in the Northern division of the movement when the will of the Acharya Purushottamprasad, who died in 1901, designated his successor as Vasudevprasad who was at the time only two years old. Another claimant to the position, an adult, took the issue to court where it was resolved in the child's favor.

Shastri Maharaj was a vocal critic of the life at the Vadtal temple and especially targeting his fellow sadhus whom he saw as following a relaxed discipline. He complained that they did not keep their ritual observances, were accumulating wealth, and had contact with female devotees. The sadhu's lax life, in the context of Lakshmiprasad's failure, led Shastri Maharaj to a most radical idea. He suggested that Swaminarayan had actually appointed a close confidant and fellow ascetic, Swami Gunatitanand (1785-1867), as his spiritual successor—not the two lay acharyas. In making his case, he highlighted a promise that Swaminarayan would remain always present within the movement in the person of his chief successor. Shastri Maharaj would trace an alternative lineage of Swaminarayan succession from Gunatitanand to Pragji Bhakta (1829-1897) to himself.

Shastri Maharaj left the Vadtal temple in 1906, prior to the removal of Lakshmiprasad from office. Immediately after his departure, the sadhus in the temple gathered and formally expelled him from their fellowship. By that time, however, Shastri Maharaj had built a small following which he organized into a separate movement now known as the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (or BAPS). He reinstated a strict discipline among the six sadhus who left with him. As the movement around Shastri Maharaj grew, the BAPS organization grew attracting both people new to the larger movement and some who had formerly been associated with the Vadtal organization. A law suit in 1935 set strict boundaries between the two organizations and stopped any attempts of the BAPS organization to operate within the older Swaminarayan temples.⁹

⁹ The BAPS organization has become the largest Swaminarayan group in the West and has produced the majority of material about Swaminarayan in English. Especially helpful for an overview are Sadhu Mukuncharandas, *Lord Swaminarayan: An Introduction*. (Amdavad, India: Swaminarayan Aksharpath,

All three of the Swaminarayan groups, the two original groups and the new BAPS organization, prospered and grew significantly through the twentieth century, though each suffered multiple schisms. In 1942, for example, Muktajivandas (d. 1979), a prominent sadhu in the Northern division withdrew and founded a separate jurisdiction, or “gadi,” which grew under the name the Swaminarayan Gadi. Muktajivandas reached some of the same conclusion as had Shastri Maharaj four decades earlier, namely that the succession through a householder lineage was not what Swaminarayan had intended. He traced the true lineage, however, through another prominent nineteenth century sadhu, Gopalananda. Muktajivandas headed the small gadi he founded for more than three decades. In 1972, he proclaimed himself the personification of the organization and thus it was proper to acknowledge his divine status. Subsequently, images of him began to appear in all the temples under his care.¹⁰

Integral to his new lineage Muktajivandas further championed the notion that Swaminarayan, in order to keep the promise to remain among his disciples, had taken birth a second time in the person of Jeevanpran Abji Bapashree (1845-1928), a well-known sadhu from the north of Gujarat. According to Muktajivandas, Ishwarcharandasji Swami (d.1942), the sadhu through whom he received his lineage, had ordered Muktajivandas to install murtis of Abji Bapashree next to those of Swaminarayan in all the temples. More recently (1987), Swami Devnandandasji, also known as H.D.H. Bapji, who acknowledges the lineage of the Swaminarayan Gadi through Ishwarcharandasji Swami and the divine status of Abji Bapashree, established the independent Swaminarayan Mandir Vasna Sanstha. As the leader of one of the smaller Swaminarayan groups, in 1996 Bapji designated a piece of land located between Ahmedabad and Gandhinagar in Gujarat where he wished that a new center for the movement (a heavenly abode or “dham”) be built. The land was subsequently purchased and the main building completed in 2001.¹¹

In 1947, Swami Dharmajivandas left the Vadatal temple to launch an educational movement that provided support and schooling for high school and college students. The new organization, the Swaminarayan Gurukul, incorporated separately but remained in relationship to the Southern division. However, in the 1970s, the group opened a hostel in the territory of the Northern division adjacent to Gujarat University in Ahmedabad, and Swami Dharmajivandas was unable to persuade either acharya to perform the formal installation ceremony for the hostel’s temple room. From that time, the Swaminarayan

1999); *Mandir: “A Passage to Eternity.”* (Toronto: BAPS Inc., Canada, 2007); and *100 Years of BAPS, Foundation, Formation, Fruits: A Photo Pilgrimage* (Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India: Swaminarayan Akrsarpith, 2007).

¹⁰ *Shree Swaminarayan Gadi Sansthan: The Organization—Humbly Devoted to the Service of Humanity* (UK: Shree Swaminarayan Gadi Sansthan, [2005]).

¹¹ The first English-language publications of this branch was issued in the Indian year 2058 (2002 on the Western Common Era Calendar: *Swaminarayan Mahamantra Granduer* (Ahmedabad, India: Sri Swaminarayan Mandir, Vasna, 2001). See also the Gadi’s webpages, <http://www.smvs.org/> and <http://www.swaminarayandham.org/>.

Gurukul has continued as a separate organization, overseeing its own autonomous centers and temples, but never formally making the final break with the larger movement.¹²

In 1966, the BAPS organization excommunicated a prominent lay preacher Dadubhai Patel (1918-1986) (popularly known as Kakaji) and his brother Bapabhai Patel (1916-2006) (popularly known as Papaji). As a result of their leaving, three new and separate Swaminarayan groups would emerge. During the 1950s, Kakaji was important in the spread of the BAPS organization in East Africa and in the early 1960s began to raise up a movement of dedicated youth who entered an ordered devoted life, though without the full vows of a sadhu. In the mid 1960s, Kakaji began to create a similar structure for young women. Meanwhile, as this youth movement was proceeding, questions were raised about Kakaji's preaching activity in Africa, where he had both recruited some dedicated young women into the ordered life and raised money to support the proposed new center for the young female devotees. At this point, the BAPS leadership decided that Kakaji had overstepped his authority in promising initiation to the young women. Thus in 1966, both Kakaji and Papaji were excommunicated from the BAPS organization.¹³

A small group of BAPS sadhus sided with the brothers and joined with them in the organization of a new wing of the Swaminarayan movement called the Yogi Divine Society. Among the young men in the ordered community Kakaji had established, a strong leader emerged in the person of Jashbhai Saheb (b. 1940) (now known as Guruvarya Param Pujya Sahebji). He took control of the group and in 1967, with Kakaji's blessing, reorganized the men as the Apoonam Mission. This group has continued to grow and spread. The men at the core of the mission did not wear the saffron robe of the renounced life. They practiced what was termed "renunciation from within," and continued to wear lay apparel (though adopted of a uniform appearance—a blue shirt and beige pants). They thus resembled the lay brothers of the third order of Franciscans.¹⁴

The young women's movement followed a similar path of the Apoonam Mission. Papaji assumed leadership of the movement, named Gunatit Jyot (in honor of Gunatitanand Swami, the sadhu through whom the BAPS organization traced their lineage from Swaminarayan). Papaji served as Gunatit Jyot's inspirational leader for the rest of his life. It developed as a female ordered community and while much smaller than its male counterpart created several centers in India and more recently abroad.¹⁵

¹² The materials published by the Gurukul circulate far beyond its institutions, especially in the vadtal's centers. See, for example, *Lord Swaminarayan's Life and his Mission for the Upliftment of all Souls* (Gujarat, India: Shree Swaminarayan Gurukul, Rajkot, n.d.); *Nitya Prarthana* (New Mumbai, India: Shree Swaminarayan Temple, 1996.); *Sanskar Dhara: The Vedic Rites and Rituals for the Children* (Gujarat, India: Shree Swaminarayan Gurukul, Rajkot, 2003.). Its website is found at <http://www.rajkotgurukul.org/>.

¹³ The history of the several groups to emerge from the career of Kakaji is currently presented in the most detail in the biography posted at <http://www.kakaji.org/kakashri.html>.

¹⁴ The Anoopam Mission has its own site at <http://anoopam-mission.org/>, but supplementary information about its founding is found at http://www.kakaji.org/34_GUNATIT%20JYOT%20AND%20ANOOPAM%20MISSION.html.

¹⁵ The Gunatit Jyot has its own site at <http://gunatitjyot.org/>, but supplementary information concerning its founding is found at http://www.kakaji.org/34_GUNATIT%20JYOT%20AND%20ANOOPAM%20MISSION.html.

Kakaji died in 1986, and was succeeded by a close associate, Hariprasad Swamiji (b.1934) who currently leads the Yogi Divine Society.¹⁶

The Southern division headquartered at Vadtal began the new century with a major organizational problem concerning the leadership of their acharya, a dispute that landed them in court. In 2000, the court ruled against the acharya and removed Maharajshree Ajendraprasadji from office. Accepting the ruling, the main body of the organization moved ahead and selected a new acharya. Meanwhile, Maharashtra Ajendraprasadji accepted neither the jurisdiction of the court in the case nor its action. With the minority that continued to support him, he organized the Shree Swaminarayan Agyna-Upasana Satsang Mandal, and continued to claim his office as the Vadtal acharya and the rights and authority that comes with that office. The members of the mandal affirm him as the true lineage holder, which has traditionally been passed through Swaminarayan's family.

In tracing the development of a movement, it is always easier to document divisions than to discern the relative importance of the underlying causes, especially when the focus falls on any one particular division. In a religiously free society, schisms are a part of religious group life, and the Swaminarayan movement has not been an exceptions. In its case, the separation of authority between the temporal and spiritual leadership provided a context for schism, especially in times when leaders on one side or the other failed to adhere to the exemplary standards expected of them. Also, over time as the movement grew and moved into different contexts, those committed to the tradition have clashed with those who attempted to provide innovative leadership to meet the needs of changing environments and circumstances. Finally, it is the case that members in expanding movements always face the choice between adhering to established leadership that is often unavailable to them or favoring less-credentialed but locally available leadership.

Swaminarayan to the West

Were we to limit our consideration to India, the Swaminarayan would be a more or less interesting example of modern Hindu sectarianism. It has emerged out of Gujarat to become a national movement, initially following the twentieth century dispersion of Gujaratis throughout India while also attracting many non-Gujaratis to its relatively modern, reformist, and communally active outlook. While maintaining traditional temple worship and participating in the annual cycle of Vaishnava holidays, the movement has trimmed the number of deities to which it gives attention, and even as it refrained from directly attacking other Hindu groups, it has dismissed much of the traditional Hindu pantheon as of a lesser order.

In the last generation, however, the different segments of the Swaminarayan movement have joined the Indian diaspora, initially to East Africa and then to Europe and North America. Assisted by the particularly high number of Gujaratis who have moved to the West, the movement has become one of the most visible elements of Hindu life abroad

¹⁶ <http://www.yds.org/akshar/index.php>.

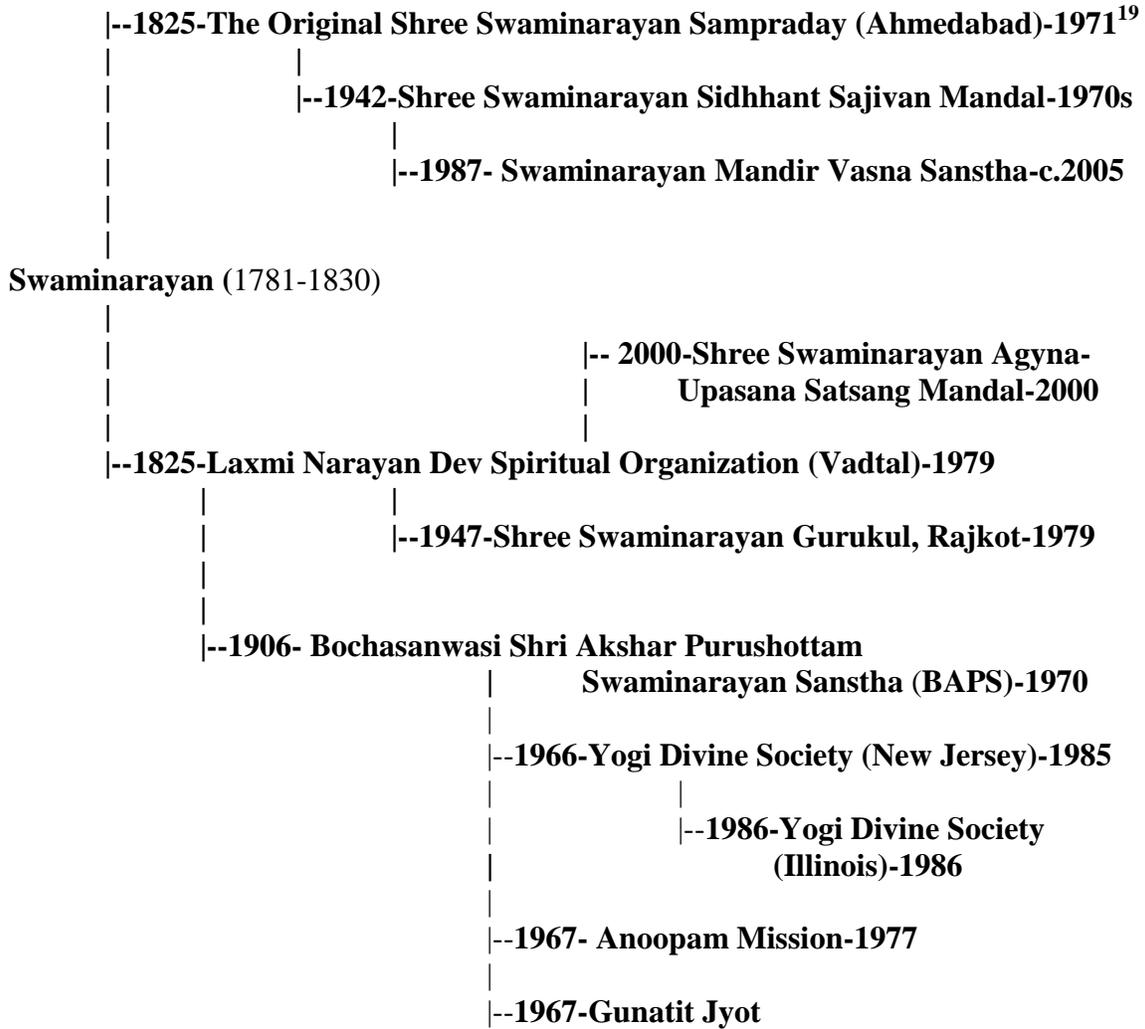
with the tightly organized BAPS group jumping out ahead of the others. In fact, BAPS has developed such a high profile in the West that even many Hindus are unaware that the other elements of the Swaminarayan movement exist or that they are now present in some strength in the West, especially England, the United States, and Canada.

During the first decade of the new century, in the United States, upon which the rest of this paper will focus, the BAPS organization has assumed a high profile as a result of its having constructed three large temples in the midst of three of the largest Indian American communities (Houston, Atlanta, suburban Chicago) with a fourth on the way (Los Angeles). The Atlanta temple has been cited as the largest Hindu temple outside of India, while the only slightly smaller but very similar temple in suburban London is now the largest Hindu temple in Europe.¹⁷ News coverage of its temple openings have eclipsed the presence of the rival elements of the movement on the web, though the two older parts of the movement remain the largest groups in India. The older Swaminarayan groups have a major asset—the many artifacts owned and used by their founder, including a number of items Swaminarayan presented as *prasad* (sacred souvenirs) to his many followers. A few such items are on display in their various temples around the world, but a concentrated collection had been assembled at their museum in Ahmedabad (formally scheduled to open in August 2011).¹⁸

¹⁷ The BAPS temple in Delhi, dedicated in 2007, has been acknowledged as the largest Hindu temple in the world, though the International Society for Krishna Consciousness is currently (2011) constructing a temple in West Bengal destined to eclipse it.

¹⁸ For information on the museum see the webpage at <http://swaminarayanmuseum.com/>.

Table 1-The Swaminarayan Tradition in America



¹⁹ The dates before the name of each group indicates its date of its original formation, and following each group, its formation in the United States.

Swaminarayan in the United States

Following the change of its immigration laws in 1965, the largest recognizable segment of new residents from India to enter the country were of a Gujarati background. Joining the early immigrants were members of the BAPS organization who settled in what has become one of the largest Asian American communities in North America, Flushing, Long Island, just minutes from New York's JFK International Airport. The BAPS members who originally settled in the area founded the first Swaminarayan temple in a private house in 1971, and began constructing the building to house it immediately across the street from the Genesha temple, the oldest Hindu temple in the country. The international leader of the BAPS movement arrived for his first visit in 1974 and formally installed the deities in the original *mandir* (temple). He returned in 1977 to dedicate and reinstall the deities in the permanent temple on Browne Street.²⁰ Thus the BAPS movement got a head start on the other segments of the Swaminarayan movement and continued to out distance them as year by year the Indian American community grew. Its leader regularly visited the country, and its more centralized organization allowed quicker responses to the developing work.

The two older Swaminarayan organizations were somewhat slower to organize in the United States, but on a visit to members in 1978, Tejendraprasadji Maharajshri, the head of what is termed in the West, The Original Shree Swaminarayan Sampraday (Under Shree Nar Narayan Dev Gadi), the Northern Swaminarayan jurisdiction headquartered in Ahmedabad, established the International Swaminarayan Satsang Organization (ISSO) a missionary society designed to coordinate efforts to build the movement abroad. The two older groups had been somewhat stymied as the geographical boundaries which separated the two jurisdictions in India did not function in the West. ISSO was designed to facilitate cooperation between the two groups, however, as the Northern division's acharya was much more active in the West, the Ahmedabad group grew much faster and it would be the later 1980s before temples loyal to the Southern division were organized.²¹

The Ahmedabad group established an initial temple, originally located in a private home, in 1981 in Weehawken, New Jersey (immediately across the Hudson River from New York City). In 1986, the Weehawken group purchased the building formerly used by the Church of Christ, Scientist, which in 1987, was dedicated as a *mandir* and has subsequently served as the headquarters of the Northern division.²² After its initial

²⁰ The story of the founding of the BAPS movement in Flushing is recounted in Raymond Brady Williams, *Religions of Immigrants from India and Pakistan: New Threads in the American Tapestry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988): 162-64. See also: *100 Years of BAPS, Foundation, Formation, Fruits: A Photo Pilgrimage* (Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India: Swaminarayan Aksharpath, 2007).

²¹ <http://www.yds.org/akshar/index.php>.

²² Al Sullivan, "A Grand spectacle with 600 Pounds of Gold, Hindu Sect Opens first U.S. Temple," *Hudson Reporter* (August 10, 2001); Posted at http://hudsonreporter.com/view/full_story/2373412/article-A-grand-spectacle-With-600-pounds-of-gold--Hindu-sect-opens-first-U-S--temple? Accessed on May 20, 2011; Thomas, Cullen, "Local Hindu Temple Offers Peace," *Hudson Reporter* (February 22, 2009). Posted at http://hudsonreporter.com/pages/full_story?page_label=weehawken&id=1980320-Local+Hindu+temple+offers+peace-

organization, the Original Swaminarayan Sampraday has moved rapidly and now has a set of associated temples in almost all of the Indian American communities across the country.

Meanwhile, through the 1980s, members of the Vadtal group in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex organized and in 1989 purchased a former church building in suburban Grand Prairie. Two years later, on July 4, 1991, Acharya Maharajshree Ajendraprasadji, the then leader of the Vadtal Swaminarayan group, known in the United States as the Laxmi Narayan Dev Spiritual Organization, visited. He dedicated the mandir and formally installed the deity statues. The progress of the Vadtal group in the 1990s was further slowed by Ajendraprasadji's problems that led in 2000 to his removal from office by action of the court in India.²³ The group existed for several years without an acharya before the present leader, Acharya Shree Rakeshprasadji Maharaj, assumed office (2003). Nevertheless, the Southern division has moved forward and now has four associated temples in the United States.²⁴

Even before the first BAPS temple was organized, in 1970 Jeevanpran Shree Muktajeevandasji Swamibapa, the founder of the Swaminarayan Gadi, made his first trip to North America to organize followers. During this trip, accompanied by several sadhus, he visited the New York City Metropolitan area, Chicago, Washington D.C., Seattle, and the Niagara Falls area. He also founded the Shree Swaminarayan Sidhant Sajivan Mandal, USA and established its first temple located in Seattle in the state of Washington. In 1979, Acharya Shree Purushottampriyadasji Swami, who had accompanied Muktajeevandasji on the 1970s visit became the new leader of the movement. At that time he founded the temple in Secaucus, New Jersey, which currently serves as the group's headquarters temple. In steps, the group was able to move from rented facilities to their own property and finally was able to construct a large temple at which the formal opening and deity installation ceremony was held in 2001.²⁵

The groups associated with the Yogi Divine Society also established work in the United States. Kakaji initially toured the United States in June of 1973, visiting numerous locations across the Eastern half of the country. Among the people he met was Dinkarbai Patel (affectionately known as Dinkar Uncle), an engineer residing in suburban Chicago. Through the remainder of the decade he became an increasingly devout follower and, following the death of his wife, took a vow of celibacy. In 1981, Kakaji formally installed a murti of Swaminarayan in Dinkar Uncle's Waukegan home, thus transforming it into a mandir. Before his passing, Kakaji also installed a murti of

Weehawken+house+of+worship+is+sect%E2%80%99s+first+in+America+-&widget=push&article-Local%20Hindu%20temple%20offers%20peace-Weehawken%20house%20of%20worsh. Accessed on May 20, 2011.

²³ The court's initial decision, the several additional cases that grew out of it, and the installation of Ajendraprasadji's successor has been widely documented and debated on a number of websites. A good starting point for pursuit of this issue is <http://www.rishabdara.com/sc/view.php?case=20216>.

²⁴ "Brief History of Swaminarayan Mandir, Grand Prairie, Texas," posted at <http://www.eswaminarayan.com/templehistory.html>. Accessed May 20, 2011.

²⁵ "History of Shree Swaminarayan Temple New Jersey." Posted at <http://www.swaminarayangadi.com/newjersey/introduction/history.php>. Accessed May 20, 2011.

Gunatitanand Swami in the mandir. Dinkar Uncle now leads two Yogi Divine temples in Chicago's northern suburbs (the second being in a home in Des Plaines).²⁶

Meanwhile, Kakaji's successor in India, Hariprasad Swamiji, initially visited the United States in 1985. He continues as head of the Yogi Divine Society in India, but has no administrative role in the Illinois temples, which are also not listed as YDS temples by the Society's headquarters. He is more directly the leader of two America temples, the largest being Haridam, the Hindu Swaminarayan Temple & Cultural Center in Lake Hiawatha, New Jersey. This temple was formally established in 1996, and has a meeting hall designed to accommodate some 1300 attendees. The other temple under his care is in Delaware, Ohio.²⁷

The Anoopam Mission and the Gunatit Jyot have both established a single America center which serves affiliated followers nationally. The Anoopam Mission headquarters is located in Coplay, Pennsylvania, the organization having grown following founder Guruvarya Param Pujya Sahebji's initial visit to the United States in 1973. The relatively small Gunatit Jyot has a small center in Jersey.

The Shree Swaminarayan Gurukul, Rajkot had extended its work to the United States and remained in an ambiguous relationship with the Vadtal Swaminarayan community. When the first Southern division temple was opened in Grand Prairie, Texas, some sadhus from the Gurukul were the first to take advantage of the facilities that had been set aside as residence space for the group's monks, and their leader, Purani Swami, frequently spoke to the members gathered in the temple. That being said, the Gurukul maintains its own autonomous center in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex in Plano, some distance from the Grand Prairie temple. It also has a center in Phoenix, Arizona, and maintains an outreach program to its members scattered in metropolitan areas across the country.²⁸

The most recent Swaminarayan group to establish itself in the United States is the Shree Swaminarayan Agyna-Upasana Satsang Mandal, which continues the leadership of the deposed Southern division (Vadtal) acharya, Maharajshree Ajendraprasadji. It established a headquarters temple in New Jersey to serve loyal members in New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey, and Ajendraprasadji has had some success in wooing members to his cause.²⁹ Ajendraprasadji's strongest US center is the former Vadtal temple in the Chicago suburb of Wheeling, Illinois, that has recently affiliated with the Mandal.³⁰ He also has an affiliated temple in suburban Atlanta.³¹

²⁶ <http://www.kakaji.org/>.

²⁷ <http://haridhamnj.org/>. There is also a YDS temple in suburban Toronto.

²⁸ <http://www.rajkotgurukul.org/>.

²⁹ <http://www.swaminarayanusa.org/>.

³⁰ The Wheeling temple, which was originally dedicated in 1991 by Ajendraprasadji when he visited the United States, has its own expansive website at <http://shriswaminarayan.org/>.

³¹ <http://gadhpurdham.com/>.

Observations

This excursion in the evolving Swaminarayan community offers a variety of observation on the larger world of new religious movements (nrms). First, several Indian-American groups led by gurus were prominent among those groups that entered the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s and became targets of the new cult awareness movement—the 3HO of Yogi BhaJan, The Divine light Mission of Guru Maharaji, the Sai Baba Organization, etc. The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), an expression of the Indian Vaishnava bhakti movement from Bengal, supplied the most popular image for media coverage of the “cults” for several decades. In the new century, however, ISKCON, which began with several thousand Western converts, has become dominated by first generation Indian American immigrants and has finally been accepted for what it claimed to be all along, just another traditional Hindu group. Since the media attention to new religions has waned, a variety of Vaishnava bhakti groups have established themselves in the West, including several active in recruiting Westerners into their community. All arrived under the radar of both the cult awareness community and the scholarly world. In addition, several older Hindu groups that existed for many years as convert groups have in the last two decades been changed by an influx of devotees from India. While attention to Islam replaced the media interest in new religions, the integration of convert groups into the growing Indian American Hindu community served to remove the guru groups from the cult awareness agenda. Simultaneously, scholarly papers on the new Hindu groups in a new religions context have become quite rare.

Second, the continued growth and splintering of the Swaminarayan community points to the larger history of new religions. Scholarship on new religions, lest we forget, began with questions of the seemingly unique situation of the late 1960s and we wasted time exploring the role of the cultural upheavals of the period in causing the dramatic upswing in the formation of nrms. That inquiry was informed by a popular hypothesis that quickly proved to have no foundation apart from secularization theories, namely that new religious movements were little more than an epiphenomenal manifestation of social stress. We have now observed societies from around the world for the last forty years in as diverse places as Japan, North America, Western Europe, and Nigeria. The story is always the same, in free societies, new religions are constantly being formed in both more stressful and more calm times. The only places their appearance is limited are in societies where government power actively suppresses them. There are certainly social correlates to nrm formation—urbanization, government suppression of religious expression, and population—but social unrest is not one of them. Religion is not epiphenomenal, it is an integral part of human culture. Like art and family life, it changes and alters over time and place, governments seek to coop and control it, and some individuals may live comfortably without it, but it keeps popping up in new and interesting ways for the great majority of us.

In the United States, the passing of a series of anti-Asian immigration laws beginning in 1908 slowed and then almost stopped the development of Hinduism in the United States. The one necessary cause of its sudden revival in the late 60s was the 1965 change in the

immigration laws relative to India. While the coming of age of the baby boom generation supported the revival with a momentary increase in the number of prospective converts and American urbanization brought them into the cities, without the legislative change, no Indian teachers/founders would have been present to recruit anyone to the different forms of Hinduism. And neither the process of recruitment nor the introduction of new Hindu groups stopped with the aging of the baby boomers. Annually, a new crop of prospective recruits and new groups for them to join have appeared as the Indian American community continues to grow.

Third, in studying the American segment of the Swaminarayan movement, during which time I was brought in to comment on the court case that has currently split the American Ananda Marga Yoga Society, I was again reminded of the importance of property issues in determining the future of new religions. During their first generation, new groups accumulate property, and immigrant groups are often lax in designating the ultimate ownership of that property. The second generation often fights over that property, and who emerges as the owner most often claims the allegiance of the followers. Most Hindu temples in America are congregationally owned, but some branches of the Swaminarayan movement are prominent exceptions. As groups move out of homes and rented facilities, property ownership has already proved important in the split of the Yoga Divine Society, where local ownership of the home-based temples proved important, and the Vadtal group has seen the movement of a large temple in suburban Chicago to the dissenting group formed by the acharya deposed in 2000.

The presence of almost a dozen Swaminarayan groups in the US, all of which are on growth trajectories at the moment, suggest a slight tweaking of our picture of new religions, which I suggest might aptly be seen as the foam formed by the fermenting elements of the religious community. Rather than seeing new religions in stages, as our Japanese colleagues did in proposing the category of new-new religions to designate those groups formed by the second generation after World War II, we should see nrms as those groups constantly being formed on the fringe of the older, more stable parts of the religious community and those older fringe groups that are able to maintain a high tension with the religious establishment. New religious tendencies are all around us. They appear as dissenting and innovative movements in established churches that at any time can separate from the parent body, such as the Emergent Church movement; sectarian movements that in a different context become new religions, like the Swaminarayan groups; and new innovative religious impulses that synthesize a new religious gestalt.

The religious community is always changing, even more so today as it aligns with a fast-moving culture. We must always be reexamining the present even as we monitor the change. To remain overly focused on groups that emerged in the 1970s is to transform ourselves into antiquarians, when our proper role is to be the generalists of the present generation's religious newness.