

INHERENT FAITH AND NEGOTIATED POWER:
SWAMINARAYAN WOMEN IN THE UNITED STATES

A Thesis

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by

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I explore the ways in which women negotiate their own forms of power in the Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS), a branch of Swaminarayan Hinduism. The study draws from research in primary sources, scholarly sources, and from fieldwork in Atlanta, GA where the Swaminarayan community has grown tremendously in recent decades, and the Shri Swaminarayan Mandir (BAPS) has become the southeast region's leading temple.

In Swaminarayan temples, men and women practice strict gender segregation and conduct their own separate and parallel programs in temple life. The saints and the Guru of the BAPS tradition are male only, however, and practice a strict form of celibacy that does not allow them to touch, speak to, or look at women. Therefore, women do not have the same access to religious specialists as do men. Regardless, women are often characterized as more religious than men, inherently faithful, and better devotees. While I find it difficult to substantiate the argument of equality, so too do I find difficulty in the argument of women's marginality. I argue in my thesis that *separate* gender roles in Swaminarayan religion, even when *not equal*, do not necessarily marginalize or subjugate women. The question of equality between religious roles of women and men is more complicated than one gender acting as super ordinate and another acting as subordinate. My research looks at the ways women can and do assert power in the Swaminarayan tradition through their own initiatives and from their own spaces.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Angela Carol Rudert, a native of Rome, GA, was born in Brussels, Belgium. Until age eighteen she enjoyed dual citizenship status, but never actually traveled outside the United States until age twenty, when she first traveled to India. It was during this trip that Angela gained a love for Indian culture and a keen interest in Indian religious traditions. Having grown up in the Bible belt of the United States, Angela became aware very early of religious prejudices in her community and a common thread in her studies has been a desire to promote a knowledgeable understanding of different religious traditions.

She earned a BA in Religion from Davidson College and spent several years after that teaching Religion and English classes at her high school alma mater, Darlington School, a college preparatory school. Angela began her graduate studies in the History of Religions in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, but came to Cornell to finish her Master of Arts degree in the graduate field of Asian Studies. She plans to pursue a PhD in Religion and teach at the college level.

Angela lives in Ithaca, New York with her husband Zachary Shulman and daughter Kayla Shulman.

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PREFACE

The Atlanta temple serves as an excellent case study for BAPS Swaminarayan temples in the United States because of its tremendous growth over the past two decades and because of its status as the southeast region's lead temple. My contact with devotees in the Atlanta temple began over ten years ago. I engaged in participant observation in the temple in 1993 with the intent of studying Asian Indian immigrant religious experiences. Studying gender roles was not part of my research agenda, but because of the strict gender separation practiced in BAPS temples, I spent the majority of my time with women. I was struck in 1993 by what I perceived as marginal participatory roles for women in the sect. My study was limited to only a few visits and communication with few contacts, and because gender had not been my primary interest, I did not look for texture in women's religious experiences. I did not enter the temple again until almost a decade later. When I returned in 2002, the sheer number of people involved in the Atlanta *satsang* was astonishing. More importantly to me, it was immediately apparent that women's participation had become more dynamic and varied, and that my earlier study did not sufficiently reflect the richness of women's religious lives in the temple – or in the BAPS sect.

For this study, I gathered general information about the roles of women in the temple from talking to as many people as possible (mostly women, but I found many men eager to volunteer information about the quality of women's devotion and their participation) in the temple during my several visits during the summer of 2003. My research trips included opportunities like chopping cilantro with women in the kitchen before the celebration of Lord Krishna's birthday, *Janmashtami*, and listening in on a temple fundraising meeting of women leaders. My research also includes a visit to the

Atlanta temple's grand Dewali celebration in 2002, and a few visits in 1993, one where I was fortunate enough to participate in an all women's festival.

With questionnaires and interviews, I sought personal narratives of devotees. I asked women questions regarding why they come to the temple, how they feel about the separation of genders in temple spaces, issues of equality or inequality, how they communicate with their guru, their feelings toward their guru, their knowledge of Lord Swaminarayan's advocacy of women's rights in the early nineteenth century, women's faith and devotion, and ideal female role models in the absence of women saints. Informants were selected (some by me and some by the director of the Ladies' Wing) from women who regularly attend the single-sex Sunday *sabhas*, assemblies, which occur before the weekly mixed *sabhas* of men and women. Of the people who come to the temple each week, the numbers of devotees who attend these supplemental study programs are relatively small. From these women with whom I mainly engaged, approximately fifteen volunteered to participate in the study by filling out questionnaires and surveys. Five from that group volunteered to participate further by giving personal interviews. The years of involvement for my volunteers ranged from some who had been coming to the temple since the time it was established in 1988 to some who had only recently immigrated to the United States because of marriage to someone involved in the temple. Their ages range from nineteen to forty-five. I cannot claim to have gathered a cross-section of informants from the temple, but rather, a cross-section from the group of women *most involved* in temple activities. This surely impacted my general impression that women's participation in temple life serves to increase their power and boost their overall self-esteem. Though some of the women in my study expressed concerns about women's roles (or lack thereof) in the sect, they nonetheless felt that temple life contributed positively to their lives and self-image, and were thus on some level empowered.