

INTRODUCTION

Swaminarayan Hinduism is one of modern India's many new sectarian religious groups. Its more distinctive characteristics include an elaborately organized global following and an unreserved Gujarati flavor. It began as a religious movement led by the guru Sahajanand Swami (1781-1830) in the early nineteenth century. Sahajanand, known by his followers as Lord Swaminarayan, settled in Loj, Gujarat upon completion of a seven-year sojourn through the Indian subcontinent. After gathering a substantial Gujarati following, he began to institute religious and social reforms during a period in which the region endured civil warfare and famine.

Raymond Brady Williams writes:

Swaminarayan Hindus interpret these times and Sahajanand Swami's career in light of the traditional Vaishnava teaching that such periods of decay and despair call forth a great religious teacher, a manifestation of god, to bring peace and order.¹

Ever since its origin, Swaminarayan Hinduism has been marked by its preservation of Gujarati cultural and linguistic traditions, devotion to Lord Swaminarayan as Lord Supreme and avatar of Vishnu, dedication to social service, and commitment to a strict ethical code that requires an uncompromising institutional segregation of the genders.

After the death of its founder, the tradition splintered, primarily with regard to its lineage of gurus. The two largest branches of Swaminarayan Hinduism are the International Satsang Organization (I.S.S.O.), the global counterpart of the Dioceses of Ahmedabad and Vadtal in India, and the Bochasanwasi Shree Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS). Both have expansive representation around the globe and in the United States. This study pertains to the Bochasanwasi Shree Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (hereafter BAPS). The BAPS sect maintains the

¹ Raymond Brady Williams, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hinduism* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 8.

most widespread and visible global following, with a much larger adherence in the United States than any other Swaminarayan movement.² BAPS is a highly organized transnational religious movement with institutionally endorsed representation in forty-five countries and a family of devotees (*sanstha*) of over one million worldwide.

As the Swaminarayan religion has grown in the United States, the most important issue to surface among devotees has been the transmission of the religious tradition to the younger generations. Like many other Asian Indians in the United States, Swaminarayan Hindus spend much time and energy attempting to transmit the cultural, linguistic and religious heritage of the motherland to their children. BAPS, recognizing that the future of the movement depends upon this successful transmission to succeeding generations, has translated these concerns into organized global action which nurtures its youth and fosters maintenance of the religious and cultural tradition.

The emphasis BAPS places on transmission illustrates the potential alienation and often perceived cultural vulnerability experienced by diasporic communities. Roland Robertson has depicted our current age as "a nostalgia producing globalization."³ Elsewhere, he asserts that the homogenizing forces of globalization lead to a *re-emphasis* on tradition.⁴ Along with Williams, many scholars of religion have observed that Hindus in diaspora characterize themselves as more religious than they would be had they not emigrated.⁵ Some Hindus living in the United States

² When I use the term "Swaminarayan" in this paper, it applies specifically to the Bochasanwasi Shree Akshar Purushottam Sanstha, BAPS, and not necessarily to other groups unless specified. You will see the use of B.S.S. in some of my resources. B.S.S. was the previous acronym used in the United States. Adherents adopted 'BAPS' in order to align themselves with BAPS Global. The name also distinguishes BAPS from the International Satsang Organization (ISSO), and the Yogi Divine Society (YDS), and Swaminarayan Gadi, also Swaminarayan groups with international followings. See Williams 2001 for information on various branches of Swaminarayan Hinduism.

³ Roland Robertson, *Globalization Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: Sage, 1992), 158.

⁴ Roland Robertson, "Globalization and the Future of "Traditional Religion"," in *God and Globalization: Theology for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Max L. Stackhouse and Peter J. Paris (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2000).

⁵ See Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Now Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2001), 87-94. See also Diana L. Eck, *Darshan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 3rd ed. (New York: Columbia

admit that had they stayed in India, they would not likely have engaged in religious activities such as temple building, but that they needed to provide cultural and religious institutions for the preservation of Hindu heritage for their children.⁶ However, *re-emphasizing* native culture in diaspora is not best characterized as a reaction to the homogenizing forces of globalization, but better described as a means for maintaining identity. Susanne Rudolph aptly states that "groups' fears that they are culturally endangered species" have led them to adopt strategies of "cultural survival."⁷ The *re-emphasis* on Swaminarayan religion and traditional Gujarati culture serves as a means for promoting a particular religious culture that BAPS devotees regard as the *best* representation of Indian culture, and which they intend to preserve for their descendants in a new land.

Behind the scenes, however, lurks another very important and related question that pertains to gender equality in Swaminarayan Hinduism. Men and women operate separately within the framework of the Swaminarayan institution. As a result, we may ask, "Are women marginalized, and thus subordinate to men, *or* are women and men separate but equal in Swaminarayan Hinduism?" Perhaps the answer is not a simple choice between these two. Williams describes the separateness as unequal, but even so, he does not express this unequivocally, "[A]pologists maintain that the separation is mutual and does not imply inferiority, but there is *some justification* for the feeling that women are separate and not equal in the sect."⁸ I argue below that separate

University Press, 1998), 77-84. T. S. Rukmani, *Hindu Diaspora: Global Perspectives* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 2001), Steven Vertovec, *The Hindu Diaspora: Comparative Patterns* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2000).

⁶ Eck, *Darshan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 80.

⁷ Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, "Introduction: Religion, States, and Transnational Civil Society," in *Transnational Religion and Fading States*, ed. Susanne Hoeber Rudolph and James P. Piscatori (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997).

⁸ Williams., 169. Emphasis added.

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. Vasudha Narayanan states that, "Hindu women have both been empowered and subjugated by religious traditions over the centuries."⁹ I find this statement fitting within the Swaminarayan sect as well as in most non-Hindu religious sects. I intend to identify modes of empowerment, yet distinguish those from gender equality, as "power and equality are not the same thing."¹⁰ Below we will look at examples that will give us *some justification* for concluding that women and men are not equal. We will also see how inequality does not necessarily indicate subordination or domination by one gender over the other. When women do not have equal access to particular religious roles or status, they often find ways to negotiate their own forms of power in new roles that become equally as important as those forms of power traditionally held by men. In this case, the inequality lies in the relative prestige or status of the roles instead of in their power.¹¹

The potential for change in women's roles within BAPS in its modern global context is great. From its origins in the early nineteenth century, the Swaminarayan religion has been marked by its ability to thrive alongside forces of modernity as it has addressed the needs of the current age and embraced social change. In the second half of the twentieth century, BAPS has adapted very successfully to a variety of cultural

⁹ Vasudha Narayanan, "Brimming with *Bhakti*, Embodiments of *Shakti*: Devotees, Deities, Performers, Reformers, and Other Women of Power in the Hindu Tradition," in *Feminism and World Religions*, ed. Arvind Sharma and Katherine K. Young (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 34.

¹⁰ Ibid. 34. See also Nancy Auer Falk and Rita M. Gross, *Unspoken Worlds: Women's Religious Lives*, ed. Nancy Auer Falk and Rita M. Gross, Third ed. (2001), Introduction.

¹¹ Mary McGee, "Introduction," in *Invented Identities: The Interplay of Gender, Religion, and Politics of India*, ed. Julia Leslie and Mary McGee (New Delhi ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 14-16. And for discussion of power and prestige, see Sherry B. Ortner, "Gender Hegemonies," in *Making Gender: The Politics and Erotics of Culture* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996), 140-41.

backgrounds and has emerged as a transnational religion. The key issues for the sect, transmission to youth and inequality between roles of men and women, intersect at a very crucial juncture here in the U.S. Are young Swaminarayan women in the United States accepting the less visible and less prestigious roles passed down from the first generation of immigrants, or are they reconstructing new ones as they negotiate their own identities in the religion? The stability of the sect may depend upon its ability to carefully instill in the younger generations the value system that calls for the separation of the sexes, and at the same time, its ability to accommodate the desire of women to take more visible and powerful roles in temple life.

A CASE STUDY: THE SRI SWAMINARAYAN MANDIR (BAPS) OF ATLANTA, GEORGIA

Before the Atlanta temple was established in 1988, John Y. Fenton conducted a survey of Asian Indians in Atlanta, Georgia (in 1985), and estimated that there were approximately fifteen to twenty core Swaminarayan families who met regularly in their private homes.¹² In 1993, the temple in Atlanta filled each Sunday with around two hundred people and had as many as one thousand attend the larger festivals.¹³ The numbers of worshippers in the Atlanta BAPS temple grew dramatically in the last decade of the twentieth century as they did in temples all over the U.S. Current figures have grown to about 900 regular members and 5,000 to 6,000 worshippers on special festival days.¹⁴

In Atlanta, as in other BAPS temples in the United States, lay leaders have the unique opportunity of incurring many of the responsibilities given only to the saints, or *sadhus*, in India:

And they recognize that few of them would be given such responsibilities or honor in India, where most often it is the retired laymen who serve as lay leaders of groups. The administrative skills and modern organizational techniques that these young professionals learn and display in their secular occupations are used effectively to advance their religious commitments.¹⁵

Until a few years ago, the day-to-day leadership of the temple in Atlanta depended primarily on the laymen, and secondarily, on *sadhus* when they visited from India. As in other BAPS temples in this country, the members of the temple in Atlanta anxiously anticipated the frequent trips made by the *sadhus*, who maintained close contact with the American male lay leaders and adherents of all ages. His Divine Holiness

¹² John Y. Fenton, *Transplanting Religious Traditions: Asian Indians in America* (New York: Praeger, 1988), 132.

¹³ Mukesh Patel, "Personal Interview," (Atlanta, GA: 1993).

¹⁴ Doug Nurse, "Ornate Marble Hindu Temple Planned in Lilburn," *The Atlanta Constitution*, March 27 2001.

¹⁵ Raymond Brady Williams, *Religions of Immigrants from India and Pakistan: New Threads in the American Tapestry* (Cambridge England; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 173.

Pramukh Swami Maharaj, the sect's current guru, has visited the United States with an entourage of saints on several occasions. These visits from the saints and Guru rekindle the enthusiasm of the American devotees and liven their activities, while assuring the preservation of the tradition on foreign soil. Until the 1990s sadhus were not permitted to live outside of India. Now, because of the enormous transnational growth of BAPS, and as a response to the pleas of the U.S. sanstha for religious instruction of their children, seven sadhus reside in this country and travel throughout the five regions in order to guide adherents. Two of these sadhus reside in the Atlanta temple and serve the southeastern United States. Regardless of the fact that religious specialists now reside in Atlanta, devotees here most desire visits from their guru, Pramukh Swami. His last visit to Atlanta occurred in 2000, and devotees are still abuzz with delight when reminiscing about it. Recently, they learned that Swamiji's improved health would permit him to tour the U.S. this summer (2004) and spend a full week in Atlanta.

Through the 1980s Swaminarayans spent less energy and money acquiring and decorating temples in the United States than they spent in the promotion and organization of BAPS. In 1993, the Atlanta temple represented one of only six *mandirs*, temples with consecrated images of divinities, in the United States. Through the 1990s, the religion experienced enormous growth and prosperity resulting in a dramatic increase in BAPS temples, which now number at thirty-two. At first glance the structure of the Atlanta temple does not seem nearly as elaborate as its neighbor, the Sri Venkateswara Hindu Temple, just a few miles away. The current BAPS temple of Atlanta proudly occupies a former skating rink. For the Atlanta sanstha, the importance of the activities that go on inside the temple outweighs what the temple may lack in outward appearance. And devotees claim to have more programs for children than any other Hindu temple in Atlanta.

Elaborate architectural temple structures are part of BAPS' initiative around the globe, but these enterprises only come about after successful implementation of first priorities to establish centers, and *hari mandirs*, other buildings converted into temples, where spiritual and cultural values may be transmitted to youth. When this occurs and the community grows both financially and numerically, then Swaminarayans typically invest in what they call "Mega Festivals," like the month long Cultural Festival of India held in New Jersey in 1991, and in grander, more traditional temples with a capacity for housing a number of sadhus. Landmark temples built from the ground up with sadhus in residence, *shikhar-badha mandirs*, such as the Akshardam temple in Amdavad, or the elaborate mandir in the London suburb of Neasden, are currently under construction in the metro areas of Houston and Chicago. The Edison, New Jersey temple currently houses the sect's U.S. headquarters, and plans for an additional cultural center the size of Akshardam in Gandhinagar, India have begun. In Barlett, Illinois, the Chicago sanstha has already begun building what may become a larger temple complex than the one in London. Atlantans too have made plans to accommodate their expansion. In fact, the two regional sadhus now reside in a former medical office building adjacent to the temple, which Atlanta devotees recently purchased for use as an education wing. In 2001, fundraising efforts allowed the Atlanta BAPS community to purchase land in suburban Lilburn, Georgia on which they intend to build an elaborate temple that will serve as the region's primary cultural center and pilgrimage site. *The Atlanta Constitution* reports:

The climax of the multi-phase project will be a 40,000 square-foot marble temple assembled by Indian craftsmen. It will be patterned after the Shri Swaminarayan Mandir on the outskirts of London. . . The Hindu congregation expects to spend up to \$20 million on the complex and has already started work on a \$300,000 community center.¹⁶

¹⁶ Nurse.

Swaminarayans in Atlanta expect to fundraise for the next several years in order to achieve this dream and to accommodate the needs incumbent to their role as the leading temple of the southeastern United States.

Growth has led to a need for more structures and temples, but the primary concern of Swaminarayans in the United States – and this is evident in Atlanta – is the transmission to their children of their "Socio-religious Movement . . . founded on the peaceful teachings of Indian Culture as revealed by Lord Swaminarayan."¹⁷ A mere glance at some of the literature published by BAPS confirms this. Magazines, pamphlets and web sites produced by the Swaminarayan Aksharpathi display pages dedicated to the younger generation and their accomplishments. Fenton explains:

Immigrants take an important step toward community formation when they invest in a building and dedicate it for the purpose of group worship. Establishing such a place marks the beginning of their transformation from the short-term attitudes of temporary sojourners to the long-range expectations of permanent residents . . . As adult first-generation immigrants began to realize that they were unlikely to return to India, many became concerned that their children might lose touch with their heritage.¹⁸

Fenton's study, conducted mainly in Atlanta, Georgia, is reinforced by the study of Priya Agarwal who conducted her survey in California. Agarwal, herself a second generation Asian Indian immigrant, states that "While economic well-being was the primary concern for the immigrants when they first arrived, as their children entered adulthood, the focus of this community is on the second generation."¹⁹ Swaminarayan Hindu immigrants in Atlanta provide a visible example of the first generation who now, after having successfully made a home in America, turn to address the crucial direction of their children's futures.

¹⁷ B.S.S., *Reaching out for a Higher Life: Understanding the B.S.S. -- a Natural Approach* (Amdavad: Swaminarayan Aksharpathi, acquired 1993), pamphlet.

¹⁸ Fenton. 169.

¹⁹ Priya Agarwal, *Passage from India: Post 1965 Indian Immigrants and Their Children; Conflicts, Concerns, and Solutions* (Palos Verdes, CA: Yuvati Publications, 1991). 29.

THE SECOND GENERATION

A small plant bends in any direction but not after it turns into a tree; it yields to nothing. So it is with children, we must culture and guide them from the beginning. -- Yogiji Maharaj²⁰

In order to teach the children to confront the evils of society in general (whether in India or abroad), and resist the lure of modern Western society in particular, BAPS has created age-based educational programs with standard curriculums on both the men's and women's sides. The Atlanta temple clearly advertises a significant place for each in its early literature. Sections of an early pamphlet from the Atlanta temple read:

CHILDREN

--OUR PRIME CONCERN

AIM:-

To nurture and train the children so they grown up to be peaceful and thoughtful citizens . . . The children are exposed to the glories of Indian Culture and Hindu traditions through audio video presentations.

YOUTH FORCE

To keep the young from falling victims to the dangerous diseases like aggression, disobedience and intoxication, that destroy character and life, and to preserve the value of Indian Culture for our future generations, our Youth Center plays a vital role.

WOMEN'S WING GIRLS' ACTIVITIES

Teenage girls and those of even younger age groups find much to learn and enjoy at their weekly meetings. The social, cultural and spiritual ideals and messages, from which many are isolated, enrich them fully and provide a deeper understanding of life.²¹

From conversations with two older second-generation immigrants (ages 25-35), I got a sense for how strong the bonds created within the Youth Force can be. Both of the young men were born in India and raised in the United States. One grew up in

²⁰ B.S.S., *B.S.S. Of Atlanta* (Acquired in 1993), Pamphlet.

²¹ Ibid.

Georgia while the other grew up in Michigan. The two became friends as boys when they met one summer at a Youth Force summer camp. The young man from Michigan came to Atlanta to do his medical residency at Grady hospital and contacted his childhood friend, became involved in Swaminarayan religious and social activities, and had "instant friends" in a new city.

The Atlanta temple, like its counterparts of BAPS in North America, attracts Gujaratis in the area who are not necessarily Swaminarayan because of the common interest in fostering "Indian values" among the children.²² Many parents value the temple for the children's socio-religious education it provides their children, and because the children enjoy the activities with their peers. One Atlanta *satsangi*, devotee (of the *satsang*, community of followers), stated:

From the beginning, it was for me, a way to keep up the religion and Indian culture. It was the best thing that I can do for my kids. It teaches them where we come from, and the cultural values of our Indian heritage. That is exactly the way it started and I have learned that, from my experience and from other people, that if the kids come from a very early age, they will know exactly where they belong (I 2003).²³

The curriculum provided by the headquarters in New Jersey for the younger generation groups teaches Swaminarayan religious and social values. One adherent informed me that sometimes parents continue to worship Krishna or another god while their children who are active in the youth programs worship Lord Swaminarayan. This, however, does not seem to cause conflict. The interest shown in the children by Swaminarayan parents and other Gujarati Vaishnavite parents seems totally compatible.

²² See Williams, *New Threads*. 153: "The emphasis is upon preserving Hindu and Gujarati culture and Swaminarayan religion as protection for the children against the perceived evils of American society."

²³ Informants remain anonymous in the text. I make use of parenthetical in text citations to indicate direct quotations from personal interviews with informants in the Atlanta temple. In the citations, I make use of the abbreviation "I" for Interview, and then give the year the interview was conducted.

Williams quotes a familiar saying of a Gujarati poet, Ardeshar Khabardar, "Wherever a Gujarati resides, there forever is Gujarat."²⁴ Upon walking into Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in Atlanta, Khabardar's words undoubtedly ring true. Most people speak Gujarati to one another. The performers sing in Gujarati while others read the sacred texts and lecture in Gujarati. In addition to performing Vedic rituals in Sanskrit, the priest of the temple performs many rituals in Gujarati as well. In fact, most of the second generation, the young people who have spent their formative years speaking English, speak fluent Gujarati because they speak it in the home and in the temple. Many of the youth take advantage of the free Gujarati language classes offered in the temple.

The publishing branch of BAPS, Swaminarayan Aksharpith, has published literature in twenty-eight languages. A bookstall near the temple entrance makes readily available many forms of media: pamphlets, brochures, cassette tapes, CD ROMS, Calendars with all of the Hindu festivals, greeting cards, books on philosophy and religion, biographies of Lord Swaminarayan and other saints, as well as small booklets of scripture, such as the *Shikshapatri*, a code of conduct taught by Lord Swaminarayan. Most of the literature specifically pertaining to the BAPS movement in the United States is written in English because a large percentage of the second generation of immigrants does not read Gujarati. It also serves as good public relations material, therefore performing a dual purpose. Swaminarayans make extensive use of all forms of modern mass media, including the Internet. BAPS maintains a very elaborate web site (in English) for adherents and anyone interested in learning more about the faith. Devotees can easily access life stories of Lord Swaminarayan, learn lessons about the tradition's ethics, read global news of the sect,

²⁴ Raymond Brady Williams, *A New Face of Hinduism: The Swaminarayan Religion* (Cambridge Cambridgeshire ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984). 170.

trace the travel of Pramukh Swami, and even participate in on-line tests to see how much they know about their faith.²⁵ Today, many Swaminarayan youth use the Internet as a tool to explain facets of their religious tradition to friends and to give presentations at school. One of the latest additions to the website is a section entitled *kids.swaminarayan.org*. It offers BAPS' youngest tech-savvy users games, puzzles and Gujarati language tutorials with a faith-centered premise.

One big question in the minds of Swaminarayan parents is "How much of our regional Gujarati heritage will our children pass on to the third generation?" Most of the children are multi-lingual. Some parents attempt to raise their children bilingually by speaking only Gujarati in the home, so that it becomes the mother tongue, knowing that when their children begin school, they will easily pick up English. Other parents believe this method would put their children at an educational disadvantage, and therefore speak both English and Gujarati at home. Williams asserts that the immigrant religious groups from India and Pakistan, which stressed ethnic identity in the first twenty to twenty-five years, have attracted a strong allegiance:

The short-term strategy of stressing ethnic identity, which has been very successful for the first generation, may not be the most effective long-term strategy for the maintenance of the religious groups unless forms of symbolic ethnicity are created in association with religious commitment.²⁶

A study of the third generation holds the answer to many questions and brings us to one of the integral concerns of the first and second generations: marriage. Fenton's Atlanta survey showed that between the first and second generations conflict occurs over "disparate notions of dating, marriage, fun and personal fulfillment," and he supplements his findings with quotes from both generations.²⁷ Both Fenton's and Agarwal's survey studies support the assumption that Asian Indians prefer to marry

²⁵ See www.baps.org.

²⁶ Williams, *A New Face of Hinduism: The Swaminarayan Religion*. 282-83.

²⁷ Fenton. 212.

Asian Indians, although this conviction remains stronger in the first generation than in the second. The first generation parents prefer that their children *not* date, while generally the second-generation children contest this. Most Swaminarayan parents arrange marriages for their children or assist in finding spouses for them, thereby adopting a system of semi-arranged marriages. For instance, caste differences matter less and less to the first generation who place more emphasis on regional ancestry when looking for potential spouses for their children. Although not true of many Swaminarayans, some parents are willing to compromise their preference of maintaining regional congruity and accept any "good Indian spouse." Swaminarayans remain strict in their non-approval of interregional marriages while they will compromise on some religious differences, assuming that those differences remain under the umbrella of Hinduism, preferably Vaishnavism. Swaminarayan parents strongly discourage and usually forbid their children to date; Modified arranged marriages seem the norm in the Atlanta BAPS temple. Children often make the final "yes" or "no" to the Gujarati spouse of their parents' choosing, and often after a date with the prospective partner. A few recently married second generation couples in Atlanta have known one another because they both grew up in the temple. Under the assumption that native Indian youth are unspoiled and less modernized than their Western counterparts, some parents look for spouses from the motherland. Many of these parents do not realize, however, that such modernization has infiltrated India as well, and that attitudes have been liberalized, especially among the middle class of large cities, from which the largest percentage of the first generation Indians came. One of Agarwal's informants complains that her cousins in India get to go out on dates and do many of the things that her parents forbid her from doing.²⁸ Atlanta

²⁸ Agarwal. 36.

Swaminarayans, more and more, have begun to seek spouses for their children from the network of United States temples.

Among immigrants, issues involving marriage matter a great deal to the children as well as to parents. The second generation's attempts to "straddle two different and strong cultures"²⁹ portray crucial concerns of their own. The fact that Priya Agarwal published such a work as a twenty-one year old woman proves that second generation voices (of both sexes) *will* be heard in this country. She attempts to express views from both generations objectively. At the same time, however, she acknowledges her second-generation status and bias. Her study may prove to be a very valuable tool to all generations of Asian Indian Immigrants struggling with generation gaps. Another example of the younger generation of Asian Indian immigrants' exerting their right to have a voice was expressed in the formal debate on arranged marriages conducted by the Indian Youth of Atlanta (IYA) performed in front of their parents in 1986.³⁰

Agarwal suggests solutions for lessening the generation gap and broadening the understanding of issues concerning the first and second generations of Asian Indian immigrants. She recommends building better communication between parents and their children and providing structured education about their ancestry and its cultural values. She expresses her concern that Asian Indians who grow up in the United States understand Indian culture through mass media such as movies, and perhaps from occasional visits to a "foreign" place, much in the way their parents once viewed American culture. Agarwal's survey indicates that communication of the second generation within itself increases at the collegiate level when many Asian Indian Americans become more interested and intellectually inquisitive about their

²⁹ Agarwal's phrase.

³⁰ Fenton. 216.

roots of their own "free" accord. In the college environment, many reassert their identity as Indians in order to learn more about themselves. Agarwal also found, without asking direct questions about it in her survey, that a very high percentage of second-generation women were concerned about gender roles.

Swaminarayans have already addressed many of the issues surrounding the generation gap between the immigrants and their children, and offered their own solutions through religious and social education in the temples: the Children's Centers, the Youth Force and the Women's Wing Girls' Activities. In its support of these younger generation groups, BAPS accomplishes several things. Institutionalized youth groups perpetuate Swaminarayan values to the second generation by incorporating religious teaching with the teaching of Indian and Gujarati-specific cultural traditions. They communicate to children about the perceived evils and dangers in society, providing them with alternatives, while at the same time, they offer an opportunity for Asian-Indian peers to communicate with each other and with adult leaders of their same gender. Hence, the importance of skilled and understanding youth educators and leaders presents itself.

The male second generation of BAPS maintains close communications with the sadhus and Pramukh Swami Maharaj himself, also affectionately known as Bapa, Swamiji, or Swamishri. They write letters and make phone calls from the United States to the saints' quarters in Amdavad, and they faithfully receive direct responses from the religious specialists, the sadhus or Pramukh Swami. Sadhu Atmaswarupda Swami contends in his paper presented at the Cultural Festival of India that the present communication of the saints and the guru with the Swaminarayan lay community within India and worldwide is a modern day modification of the ancient *gurukul* system, where small groups of disciples would learn at the feet of their guru.³¹ In the

³¹B.S.S., "Cultural Festival of India -- Special Issue," *Swaminarayan Bliss*, October-November 1991.

absence of a guru in their local setting in the U.S., devotees use global forms of communication. Today the Swamis also take wings and visit their brothers in the U.S., not only in the thirty-two temples, but also in all the Swaminarayan centers where smaller groups of devotees reside. On these trips, they spend a great deal of time with groups of male youth.

The video, *Towards Better Living*, a self-presentation film created by the Swaminarayan Aksharpith, boasts of 15,000 Youth Centers around the world, which stress "personality development through moral, social and spiritual training."³² The Children's and Youth force's activities as represented in the literature of BAPS lead us to the conclusion that Swaminarayan Youth have a VOICE, and therefore, it seems that the Swaminarayans need not take heed to Agarwal's suggestions. They have aggressively addressed the concerns of the generation gap between parents and children. What remains to be addressed, however, is the degree to which the Women's Wing and its girls' groups have a voice in Swaminarayan Hinduism. Does BAPS need to focus more attention on their female youngsters?

³² B.S.S., *Towards Better Living: Bochasanwasi Shree Akshar Purushottam Sanstha -- an Introduction* (Amdavad: Swaminarayan Aksharpith), video.

SOCIAL AND MORAL REFORMS

In order to fully understand the context of the separation of the sexes in Swaminarayan Hinduism, we must consider the tradition's origin as a socio-religious reform movement. The founder, Sahajanand Swami,³³ left his native home in Uttar Pradesh (near Ayodya) at age eleven in 1793 in search of a guru. According to hagiographical accounts, his pilgrimage lasted for seven years and took him over most of the Indian subcontinent, through the Himalayas into Nepal, south in to Tamil Nadu and ended in Loj, Gujarat where he joined an ashram of Swami Ramananda.³⁴ After living a short time in the ashram, Ramananda named him chief disciple in 1800 and then as his successor just prior to his death. After taking the mantle in the ashram, Sahajanand aggressively began making religious and social reforms in the Gujarati region. His social efforts involved free food distribution centers, digging wells, and helping to provide basic needs such as food and water during times of famine and catastrophe.³⁵ His religious teachings reflected a "puritanical ideology" which included bans on eating meat, taking alcohol, singing of "vulgar songs" at weddings and festivals, strict separation of men and women in religious activities, and prohibition other behaviors he viewed as illicit.³⁶ His views on caste were somewhat lenient and he took disciples of all castes, though separate temples were built for

³³ For simplicity and readability, I am using the name Sahajanand. At the time he began instilling reforms, he was known by this name. The Swaminarayan founder was named Ghanshyam as a boy and at the time his journey began. His first guru renamed him Nilkanth. He did not acquire the name Sahajanand, or the title Swami, until he became the acharya of the ashram upon Ramananda's death. He was recognized as divine by his followers during his lifetime, and thereafter called Lord Swaminarayan.

³⁴ See Ramesh M. Dave, *Neelkanth Charitra: Lifesketch of Lord Swaminarayan During Travels in India as a Young Ascetic*, 1st ed. (Ahmedabad: Bochasanvasi Shri Aksharapurushottam Sanstha, 1977). H.T. Dave, *Life and Philosophy of Shree Swaminarayan*, ed. Leslie Shepard (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1974). See also www.baps.org for numerous biographical accounts, including pictorial ones.

³⁵ BAPS, *Lord Swaminarayan, Life: Socio-Spiritual Works* [Essay] (BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, 1999, accessed October 2002); available from www.baps.org.

³⁶ Kenneth W. Jones, *Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India* (Cambridge England; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 126.

untouchables. His efforts also turned specifically toward helping women. Cited by devotees as "Foremost Champion of Women's Emancipation,"³⁷ his attacks against practices of violence against women such as *sati* and female infanticide as well as his rejection of restrictions against widow remarriages have held him in high esteem among his followers for over two hundred years. Like other nineteenth century religious reformers in British India, Sahajanand Swami had significant contact with colonial officials. Williams writes:

His followers point with pride to the salutary effect his preaching and teachings had in leading the residents of the territory to morally upright and peaceful lives in the midst of the chaotic situation. Alongside the "Pax Britannica" they place the "Pax Swaminarayana" and suggest that it both complemented and was more effective than the former in the positive transformation of Gujarati society in the first quarter of the nineteenth century.³⁸

Williams also explains that Governor John Malcolm, who came to Rajkot once the British established supremacy in the region in 1830, also made it his mission to eradicate *sati* and female infanticide, and he knew that he needed the cooperation of influential Indians to aid him in his undertaking. Williams writes, "It is certain that Malcolm was very pleased to meet a religious reformer who taught that *sati* and other such practices were not a legitimate part of orthodox Hinduism."³⁹ Sahajanand forbade widow suicide and the murder of infant daughters among his followers. In fact, he identified the practices as social customs without rightful religious meaning. For widows, he provided religious models to follow as alternatives to committing the sinful act of suicide:

He encouraged young widows who could not follow the path of chastity to remarry. For other widows he gave regulations for conduct that now seem restrictive, but which nevertheless permitted them a respected and secure place in the social order.⁴⁰

³⁷ BAPS, (accessed).

³⁸ Williams, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hinduism.*, 12.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 167.

Viewed by followers as ahead of his time, he understood the connections between the practice of dowry and female infanticide. He strictly forbade the practice of infanticide for his followers, and preached against the misuse of dowry. In addition, "he did indicate that he would pay the dowry for families who could not afford to arrange marriage for a daughter."⁴¹ Sahajanand also stressed the importance of religious and secular education for females. Williams notes that women's education efforts, which increased in the Bombay presidency from 1823 to 1849 and resulted in the formation of schools, coincided with the flourishing of Sahajanand's teachings.

The literature published by BAPS points to Lord Swaminarayan's teachings and actions as instrumental in the "uplift of women." In *Bhagwan Swaminarayan's Life: Biography*, which can be found on the BAPS main web site, an essay entitled "Uplift of Women" tells of Sahajanand's work in social reforms.⁴² The BAPS essayist writes:

Lord Swaminarayan proved to be the first, perhaps the only luminary, in India who rose against the shocking plight of women in society. For them, He carved a tunnel of succour, liberating them from their neglected status, suppression and exploitation.⁴³

After first putting forth his efforts against widow suicide and female infanticide, "Lord Swaminarayan's efforts then focused on the religious education of women."⁴⁴

Followers ascertain that Lord Swaminarayan taught that moksha was for all people, regardless of "distinctions of sex, caste, wealth, status, religion, friend or foe."⁴⁵ Lord Swaminarayan's biographer explains that despite criticism from his own contemporary society, who "loathed the uplift of lower caste women," Sahajanand maintained that

⁴¹ Ibid., 167.

⁴² BAPS, *Uplift of Women* [Essay] (BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, 1999, accessed October 2002); available from www.baps.org.

⁴³ Ibid.(accessed).

⁴⁴ Ibid.(accessed).

⁴⁵ Ibid.(accessed).

religious education was the inherent right of all people.⁴⁶ Followers understand Lord Swaminarayan's reforms as "audacious and revolutionary steps in uplifting women."⁴⁷ The curriculum of women's study classes rightly emphasizes Sahajanand's reforms in its understanding of women's roles. When asked if women find Lord Swaminarayan's efforts in the uplift of women empowering, a second-generation immigrant answered:

Oh, yes, definitely, because there was so much corruption going on in India and the rest of the world around that time. And it's not just historically in Hinduism that you see the degrading of women, but everywhere. And all over the world. So, that when you see that your Lord was stopping sati and other stuff then, it makes you proud that women are not just left overs. (I 2003)

In keeping with Sahajanand's opposition to the evils caused by dowry, today BAPS conducts activities to denounce the practice. At Swaminarayan Youth Conventions, young male devotees pledge not to accept dowry. In following Sahajanand's prohibition against female infanticide, "Pramukh Swami has attacked a new form of *dudhpiti* [the practice of killing female infants by drowning them in milk] with equal vengeance – the practice of aborting female fetuses after sonograms or amniocentesis tests."⁴⁸ BAPS repudiates the practice by proclaiming it to be today's form of female infanticide and educates villagers of its immorality. On its web site, BAPS reports: "In 1997, India reported six million abortions, of which seventy percent were female. In Mumbai, a clinic performed 8,000 abortions, 7,999 were of girls."⁴⁹ BAPS conducts "Dowry-Free Mass Marriages," which seek "to dispel the social evil of dowry and help the poor meet the cost of marriage."⁵⁰ At the same time, the organization hopes to discourage female infanticide by showing underprivileged

⁴⁶ Ibid.(accessed).

⁴⁷ Ibid.(accessed).

⁴⁸ BAPS, *Activities: Women's Wing*(BAPS, 1999, accessed October 2002); available from www.baps.org.

⁴⁹ Ibid.(accessed).

⁵⁰ Ibid.(accessed).

families, who do not wish to have daughters because of the looming financial burden of future marriage arrangements, that dowry is not necessary.

For Swaminarayans, the separation of the sexes in places of worship and religious education must also be seen from this reformist light:

Lord Swaminarayan has given special discipline to preserve chastity. Today many people misunderstand this arrangement of separate assemblies for men and women. But in reality, Lord Swaminarayan has revealed the real meaning of womanhood. He has provided us our own platform where women organize their own assemblies. They plan, manage and execute their own programs. Through these special disciplines, Lord Swaminarayan has given women exclusive freedom to develop themselves.⁵¹

For a correct understanding of the discipline of gender separation, one must understand the premises upon which Sahajanand Swami reformed practices among religious teachers and saints. During his early pilgrimage, Sahajanand found sexual corruption and hypocrisy in many ashrams, as when sadhus misused their spiritual power to molest women. In fact, the notion of greedy, lecherous male sadhus abusing credulous followers in Hindu ascetic traditions abounds in contemporary imaginations as well. The separation enforced by Sahajanand "shielded them [women] from the promiscuous behavior of males."⁵² Therefore, Sahajanand's strict vows of chastity, eight-fold *brahmacharya*, which he enforced among his mendicant disciples, were seen as beneficial to Hindu ascetic traditions *and* to women devotees. Modern day Swaminarayan sadhus adhere to the same eightfold vow of absolute celibacy, and thus, they must completely avoid women: "Swaminarayan ascetics strive for celibacy that is both physical and mental; they avoid sexual contacts and they attempt to avoid lust."⁵³ The vows of the saints include restrictions not to associate with women, not to look at them, and not even to address women in a lecture or teaching session. The

⁵¹ B.S.S., *Towards Better Living*. Words spoken by a woman in Gujarati, simultaneously translated and spoken by the male narrator of the film. (Why? Is this to protect the saints from hearing women's discourse?)

⁵² BAPS, *Uplift of Women*(accessed).

⁵³ Williams, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hinduism.*, 150.

only exception to the rule may occur in the case of emergency. If a saint must speak to or touch a woman in a life or death situation, for her or for him, he may do so (*Shikshapatri* #182).⁵⁴

For all devotees, even those not aspiring to sainthood, the opposite sex represents a distraction from devotion to god, and therefore men and women worship separately. Lord Swaminarayan prescribed this separation in his scriptures:

All male and female devotees coming to the temples of Shri Krishna for darshan either daily or on days of religious festivals shall keep themselves aloof from the opposite sex (*Shikshapatri* #40).⁵⁵

Satsangis in Atlanta generally agree with the concept of separating men and women in the temple as they feel it keeps them focused on god. One devotee said, "*Whatever time you are spending in the temple, it should be fully devoted to God*" (I 2003).

According to my informants, separation of the sexes in Swaminarayan temples assures (at least in theory) that at least one place central in their lives will remain free from temptation.

The counterpart to the saints' vow of chastity for householders is strict monogamy. Devotees also view this vow as contributing to the "uplift of women." Lord Swaminarayan preached that adultery, along with other vices such as prostitution, gambling, consumption of alcohol and eating a non-vegetarian diet, leads to the deterioration of the family. He denounced it for all devotees, both male and female. Swaminarayan literature on the subject portrays the protection of *family* as inherently part of the protection of *women*. In the time Lord Swaminarayan lived, a woman's strength indeed depended upon the strength of her family.

⁵⁴ Shikshapatri, *The Shikshapatri: A Code of Conduct by Lord Swaminarayan*, trans. H.D.H. Shri Pramukh Swami Maharaj (Amdavad, India: Swaminarayan Aksharpith, 1991), 93.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

SEPARATE BUT EQUAL?

The Atlanta temple follows all the prescribed gender regulations that result in mixed assemblies and additional separate, yet parallel, meetings for males and females of all ages. In Atlanta, the male lay leaders and youth conduct the weekly mixed assemblies. The priest tends to the gods in the temple's sanctum while the leading of the people in readings, lectures, songs and prayers is left to the Atlanta Swaminarayan householders and their sons. The men sit on the left and the women sit on the right of the large floor space, and only the men and boys take the podium for discourses and performances during these mixed assemblies. Both "men and women are expected to conduct themselves modestly so as not to attract the attention of the opposite sex."⁵⁶ Men perform *arti*, ritual waving of an oil lamp in front of a divine image, in the temple each night at six o'clock, and although women are invited to attend, most are busy with domestic duties at that time. Women typically perform *arti* in the temple separately from men, and perform *puja* in the home. During mixed assemblies, and on special festival days, women and men perform *arti* simultaneously, with equal fervor, and on the same floor – with women on the right and men on the left. When the saints come to visit the temple and give public talks, the women may also attend and listen, but they must sit in the back where they will not be visible to the saints. Women may always listen to male performances and talks, but they may not participate in the discourse, and the saints are not allowed to teach directly to them.

The often-heard declaration, “separate, yet parallel, programs for ladies and gents” remains difficult for Swaminarayans to substantiate. True, men do not enter the women’s side and women do not enter the men’s side of the temple. They generally occupy equal spaces except for one, the stage, from where talks and performances are

⁵⁶ Williams, *New Threads*. 157.

broadcast throughout the temple. It is only when women enter the temple without males that they can occupy this space. Women conduct their own festivals – ones that only they produce and only they may attend – in addition to participating in the weekly mixed assemblies and regularly scheduled *all temple* festivals. During the *women's only* festivals, the women take the stage. Girls' groups perform dances and plays, and women are allowed to teach religious discourses. Men do not need to have their own festival days because during every other event besides women's festivals, they remain front and center.

BAPS has made an effort to provide guidance, communication, and the teaching of religion and culture to its younger generation of girls. But has it been equal to the effort made to educate young males? In the literature from the Swaminarayan Aksharpath, it does not appear that females have been given the same attention as male peers. The language used indicates this. In early Swaminarayan literature (acquired in 1993) the terms "children" and "youth" implicitly exclude "girls." Males needed no distinctive gender qualifiers. Anything *not* labeled with gender applied to them. Women of the first and second generations were represented in separate and less significant sections – and always identified by their gender. One example, the magazine *Cultural Festival of India, U.S.A.: Swaminarayan Bliss* recognizes the hard work females put into the production of the festival in distinctively smaller sections entitled "Lady's Portfolio" (representing young women volunteers) and "Women Volunteers," while it recognizes the efforts of male adherents in larger sections entitled "Children," "Youth Volunteers," and "Volunteers." The same sort of divisions are true for other BAPS media as well, including the video *Towards Better Living*, which presents women apart from the main presentation of the Swaminarayan movement in a portion of the film about the Women's Wing. Even though pamphlets distributed today, and the continually updated website (www.baps.org), contain more

gender inclusive language, women simply receive less press. One could argue that this has less to do with any intentional discrimination and more to do with the fact that sadhus operate the Swaminarayan Aksharpath. When it comes to writing about the women's wing, that task falls on a female volunteer rather than on a full time religious specialist. Separate spaces, even in media, make it simpler for celibates to avoid viewing or thinking about women. A great point of pride for the Women's Wing lies in the fact that it publishes and edits its own journal in Gujarati, called *Premvati*. However, many second-generation women in the United States, even those with a command of the spoken language, do not find this magazine a helpful source because they do not read Gujarati. Although extremely active in BAPS, women receive less media representation than the mainstream movement.

Gender inequality in BAPS presents itself most notably in women's inability to access the tradition's living guru, Pramukh Swami. Swaminarayans steadfastly believe that the practice of *bhakti*, devotion, equally enables women and men to attain moksha. As in most bhakti traditions, in BAPS the guru is the living embodiment of divinity, and therefore, an important source of power and grace – and an immensely popular recipient of devotion. Swaminarayans seek *darshan* from the images of Lord Swaminarayan and also from Pramukh Swami. Eck describes darshan: “The central act of Hindu worship, from the point of view of the lay person, is to stand in the presence of the deity and to behold the image with one's own eyes, to see and be seen by the deity.”⁵⁷ Daniel Gold describes the darshan that occurs when sight is exchanged between a living guru, or other spiritually powerful person, and disciple as having a “similar dynamic” to that which occurs between divine image and worshipper.⁵⁸ Swaminarayan devotees describe the darshan from the Pramukh Swami

⁵⁷ Eck, *Darshan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 3.

⁵⁸ Daniel Gold, "Guru's Body, Guru's Abode," in *Religious Reflections on the Human Body*, ed. Jane Marie Law (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), 238. See more references

as his “*giving darshan*” or their “*receiving darshan*” from him when they see him face to face. In Atlanta and around the globe, hundreds of Swaminarayan devotees stand in line to receive the transmission of grace, through darshan, from Pramukh Swami wherever he visits. Some male devotees from Atlanta have traveled with Swamiji and his entourage of saints and benefited from multiple darshan opportunities.

Women may not receive darshan from Swamiji in person, nor may they directly correspond with him as males do. The younger women in the temple expressed ambiguity in their responses to my queries about these two important discrepancies. Swaminarayan women respect the vows of the saints, and understand the rigid discipline of separation that prevents their having contact, physical or visual, with them, although many dare to get as close as possible to Swamiji and his top sadhus for darshan.⁵⁹ Today, women along with male devotees take darshan electronically from the BAPS web site. However, virtual images do not hold the same power as consecrated images in the temple that are already accessible to women. Williams notes that an early Internet site offering darshan also issued a warning, “that the images could not be used for darshan in exactly the same way as images in the temple.”⁶⁰ Devout Hindus believe in the ability of a consecrated image of the divine in a temple to give darshan because of the deity’s presence in the image.⁶¹ However, the darshan from images in the temple does not seem to create the same fervor that a face-to-face blessing from Pramukh Swami does.

to receiving darshan from a living being in Daniel Gold, *The Lord as Guru: Hindi Sants in North Indian Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 36-40. For a discussion of the holy man as embodiment of divine – specifically in Swaminarayan Hinduism – see Raymond Brady Williams, “The Holy Man as the Abode of God in the Swaminarayan Religion,” in *Gods of Flesh/Gods of Stone: The Embodiment of Divinity in India*, ed. Joanne Punzo Waghorne and Norman Cutler (Chambersburg, PA: Anima, 1985).

⁵⁹ Williams, *A New Face of Hinduism: The Swaminarayan Religion*. 145.

⁶⁰ Williams, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hinduism*. 194.

⁶¹ Eck, *Darshan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 3.

For many women in the temple, this does not pose an irresolvable problem. Prominent leaders from the Women's Wing in the Atlanta temple tell me that women receive darshan in dreams, thoughts, and prayers that are answered. Receiving darshan from god or guru in a dream has precedence in the Hindu tradition and also in the Swaminarayan sect.⁶² One woman asserts, "*Pramukh has total respect for women. He is always telling men to act like women in bhakti, [devotional worship]. Men's bhakti is nothing compared to female's*" (I 2002). Men in the temple quickly avow that women are more faithful. One man informed me that if you ask a woman if she has seen Swamiji, then she will answer "*yes, that she has even seen Lord Swaminarayan himself*" (I 2003). A second generation female leader acknowledges the difficulty for women in not having the benefit of contact with and darshan from the guru and saints, but shows her own reconciliation to it:

There were times when I felt like, gosh it could be so much easier. But, I can understand the meaning behind it. When you become celibate and leave all these worldly things, everything contradicts that. And, I think that we [women] have a power, you know we can stir men's minds in different directions, cause them to go off-track. And they have to leave every worldly desire, which includes women. So, for them to remain in that, remain celibate, it makes sense to me that we can't see them or talk to them, for that very reason. And, Pramukh Swami, our guru, he has to set an example to these people that are following him, these 700 saints who have left everything, to be under his guidance, he has to follow this as well.

What we're dealing with is spiritual. We're looking at it on a spiritual level, not really a social level. Spiritually, you can understand that they've left everything, so you can't have that face-to-face interaction. So, we think about it like that and support them in what they are doing. (I 2003)

However, not all women agree on this point and another leader in the Women's Wing readily admits that, "*The new generation feels some discrimination about this*" (I 2003). The same is sometimes true for women who marry into the faith. Another woman relayed that after sixteen years since her marriage into the Swaminarayan

⁶² For an account of Sahajanand Swami having received *darshan* from the (long ago deceased) Hindu saint, Sri Ramanuja, proponent of *Vishishta-Advaita Vendanta* philosophy, see Dave, *Life and Philosophy of Shree Swaminarayan*, 47.

community she still could not understand why women could not see the guru face-to-face, but that when she saw Pramukh Swami (from afar) during his visit to Atlanta in 2000, she began to believe that he really does care about women. While she listened to his talk from the back of the room, she felt that he spoke directly to her heart. She still feels inequalities exist, but she also exhibits devotion:

*Sometimes I ask why, why, why? And after a while, I just don't say it, don't worry. I'll get my answers. If I don't, I don't care. But after seeing Bapa, the work that he does and how he does it, it makes me, it **does** make me proud to say he's our guru." (I 2003).*

The inability to access the guru and saints directly may cause some second-generation Swaminarayan women to reevaluate the gender roles constructed through their religious tradition and question what they perceive as a double standard, but it does not seem to sway their faith.

The communication channels which open between the sadhus and the “Youth” and “Children” close for the “Girls.” In fact, any communication between females and the saints, or Guru, must be conducted through male relatives. Male adherents abroad make frequent phone calls and emails to the sadhus and to Pramukh Swami in India seeking advice in personal, social, educational, professional and spiritual matters. The letters they write receive almost immediate answers now that mass communication has narrowed the global gap. Because the saints and Swamiji must not hear the voice of a woman, a phone call to India does not present itself as an option for a woman. Women may ask their husbands, fathers, brothers or sons to ask advice for them, and to relay the answers. The most direct means of communication offered to females is the letter. A female adherent may write a letter to Pramukh and sign “Wife of husband's name” and he will answer to the male relative. This applies to electronic mail as well. Women in the Atlanta temple attest to receiving prompt responses to

their letters to Pramukh Swami. A woman does have access to communication with the Guru, although only indirectly through her male kin interceptor.

Many young boys get to meet Pramukh Swami as they did his spiritual predecessors. A father-to-be, who grew up in the United States and now resides in Atlanta, told me a story about the day he saw and was touched by the previous guru, Yogiji Maharaj, at age ten, "*He gave me a slap on the back -- as a blessing*" (I 1993). He further explained that Yogiji was known for his love-pats or affectionate slaps, which he gave to his male devotees. His wife and female children will never have such an experience of their own to recall. He admitted this and added, "*For that reason, the women must have more faith in God and the guru than the men do to be Swaminarayan* (I, 1993)." The Atlanta BAPS pamphlet states:

The women members of the B.S.S are as dynamic as the men. It is no exaggeration that there are more female devotees than male. Their abilities are so comprehensive that they manage separate activities at the women's center.⁶³

Another male devotee told me, "*Ladies have more bhakti than men. They have more faith – it's inbound*" (I 2002). Women themselves claim to be stronger devotees and more faithful than the men. One woman in Atlanta stated, "*Women have more, not just Swaminarayan, but all women, have more faith in the god or something than the men. I don't know what reason, but men it seems they have less faith,*" and her sentiments were echoed by many others (I 2003). The video *Towards Better Living* quotes the worldwide statistics of 1,200 Women's Forums, 900 Teenage Girls' Forums, and 400 Girls' Forums.⁶⁴ These numbers have grown in the past decade and continue to grow. In fact, BAPS claims that worldwide, more women participate in their programs than do men. Clearly we have a many sided issue when addressing women's roles in BAPS if women devotees outnumber men. Perhaps women's

⁶³ B.S.S., *B.S.S. Of Atlanta* (acquired 1993), pamphlet.

⁶⁴ B.S.S., *Towards Better Living*.

"inbound faith" is precisely what Lord Swaminarayan revealed as "real meaning of womanhood."⁶⁵ It seems that in this sense, Swaminarayan women have been designated as "guardians of cultural and religious integrity."⁶⁶ Are women inherently more faithful than men? And do their large numbers translate into power?

⁶⁵Ibid. Also quoted above after Women's Wing Chapter heading.

⁶⁶Claire Dwyer, "Negotiating Diasporic Identities: Young British South Asian Muslim Women," *Women's Studies International Forum* 23, no. 4 (2000). 477.

THE POWER OF THE WOMEN'S WING

One may note upon entering the temple that women dominate the space inside the kitchen. They are busy preparing food to offer to the gods that will later be eaten by the worshippers. In her study of the Sri Siva-Vishnu Temple in Lanham, Maryland, Joanne Punzo Waghorne writes about the spaces occupied by women in that new temple:

There are some real ironies here. For American feminists, women in the kitchen marks gender segregation and subordination, but these South Asian women work in the temple kitchens, a task that in India is reserved for Brahmin men, whose ritual purity was a prerequisite for handling the holy food which was always served first to god. When women now make this *prashad*, sanctified meals eaten by the devotees as a sacrament, they are assuming a priestly role; their domestic task has expanded in America into temple service.⁶⁷

Although the temple mentioned here in Maryland is not a Swaminarayan temple, commonalities exist. In Swaminarayan religion, the kitchen represents a space in which women enjoy their work and have negotiated power in their own right. They have taken over an indispensable role. Just as laymen have become religious leaders in the United States and have assumed priestly roles, so too have women become priests when it comes to feeding the gods. In Atlanta, women worship god inside the temple and feed god inside the temple. Before serving food to the masses, they give it to the gods represented in pictures hanging in the temple's kitchen. The wife of the Atlanta priest feeds the gods on a daily basis. In this instance, Swaminarayan women have taken their domestic expertise into the most sacred of spaces, the mandir.

Yearly festivals, such as Diwali, celebrated in Swaminarayan temples around the world also represent the enterprises of women. Festivals are extremely important in Hinduism and Lord Swaminarayan echoed this in his teachings: "My disciples of

⁶⁷ Joanne Punzo Waghorne, "The Hindu Gods in a Split-Level World: The Sri Siva-Vishnu Temple in Suburban Washington, Dc.," in *Gods of the City: Religion and the American Urban Landscape*, ed. Robert A. Orsi, Religion in North America (Bloomington, IN: Indiana Univ Press, 1999), 124.

means shall celebrate the religious festivals in temples with great pomp and enthusiasm" (*Shikshapatri* #156).⁶⁸ In the United States, festivals take on an even more auspicious role. They aid in the transmission of cultural traditions to girls and boys of the younger generations. Diwali was celebrated in a moving and special way in the Atlanta temple when I visited the festival in 2002, and although the women credited the men with having contributed equally to the production, their own work was evident. When the temple doors opened to the public, women were at the forefront. Their presence and participation was obvious to any observer. Not only had they labored for days preparing sweets and decorating the temple (often with children in tow), but they also greeted the 5,000 or more guests, both male and female, as they arrived. They collected and input data of guests into computers, served prashad, and served as public relations spokespeople. Once completely inside the temple, men and women occupied different but equal spaces for performing arti, admiring the decorations, eating prashad, sweets, and celebrating the New Year.

Swaminarayans have taken Sahajanand's philanthropic lead to great heights in their efforts to aid others less fortunate. BAPS defines itself in much of its literature as a "socio-spiritual Hindu organization" seeking to serve society. Indeed, the labor of BAPS in social services has been extraordinary. Missionary like in their charge, BAPS has taken on projects all over the world:

The BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha strives to care for the world by caring for the societies, families and individuals. This is done by mass motivation and individual attention, through elevating projects for all, irrespective of class, creed, colour and country. Its universal work through a worldwide network of 6,814 centres has received many national and international awards and affiliation with the United Nations.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ *Shikshapatri*, 81.

⁶⁹ BAPS, *Bochasanwasi Shree Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha: Social and Spiritual Care* (Amdavad: BAPS, acquired 2002), pamphlet.

BAPS engages in assistance ranging from medical, educational, environmental, social and "tribal" (for the remote villages). In social services, the Women's Wing has really made a name for itself among the followers of Lord Swaminarayan. Women's volunteer groups from BAPS have engaged in a variety of social services such as providing relief work after natural disasters, leading and participating in anti-dowry campaigns, encouraging "tribal uplift" in remote villages of India, providing medical care and teaching literacy in literacy campaigns for women.⁷⁰ In Atlanta, a woman directs the BAPS Care medical program, which offers a free weekly medical clinic for both women and men. This program, a much-needed service that is open to anyone, seeks to provide basic medical services to the non-insured on a regular weekly basis, and provides specialized medical services at annual Health Fairs. Many women from the Atlanta temple perform *seva* (commonly defined in contemporary Hindu movements as *service* to a god or guru) in their temple community and in the greater Atlanta community at large, while some have made trips to India to perform *seva*. Devotees identify social service as a responsibility incumbent upon them, and wherever one finds a Swaminarayan temple, one also finds a corps of volunteer social workers. Women in the United States do a great deal of volunteer work and instill in their children the desire to help others. The pamphlet, *Social and Spiritual Care*, credits the Women's Wing throughout the piece for their work among the less fortunate. The piece states, "Over 7,000 women volunteers manage parallel social & spiritual activities."⁷¹

Perhaps the most important role of religious specialty for Swaminarayan women rests in their teaching. In the Swaminarayan tradition, both in India and globally, women have become religious teachers, not only at home, but also in the temple, yet

⁷⁰ BAPS, *Women's Wing*(accessed).

⁷¹ BAPS, *Social and Spiritual Care*.

another role that Hinduism traditionally reserves for male Brahmins. In coordination with the other religious specialists in the United States, the sadhus who reside in Atlanta set the curriculum for the Women's Wing. Through the leaders of the men's side, they pass this program on to the women leaders. Even though directed by male sadhu's prescriptions, women organize and conduct their own programs, including training and initiating new volunteer teachers. Women who lead other groups of women and groups of girls hold a great deal of religious authority in the temple. In separate spaces, women have been given a voice in Swaminarayan temples. Although it is not equal to that given to the men, and their platform remains in a secluded part of the temple, women teachers do exert considerable power as they transmit religious and social values of Swaminarayan Hinduism to other women and girls.

Currently in her second year of service, the Coordinator for the Women's Wing in Atlanta tells me that "*the Women's Wing has come a long way in the last ten years*" towards giving women equal say in temple affairs: in the temple women and girls have more time on the stage, a female representative from the women's wing participates in temple administrative meetings, more local, national and global programs for girls exist than ever before, and in the U.S. regional women representatives meet at national conventions to set their educational curriculum. She and others attribute this change to their guru who recognizes that women have equal talents to men. More and more, the ladies active in the Women's Wing in Atlanta and elsewhere in the United States today are young, second generation, Western born and educated. They have grown up asserting themselves in arenas outside the home and now have professional careers. They volunteer their talents in the temples and things are changing. They want recognition, and they usually receive it. Their efforts do not seem to be lost on the male side. The Women's Wing already has a tradition of

strength, but today, it grows not only in strength, but also in representation as it makes its voice more and more audible.

CONCLUSION

Within the BAPS tradition, many assert that the restrictions for women resulting in separate meetings and non-communication with the saints free women of sexual exploitation and encourage independence among women. Surely the women do assert their independence and they do have a voice, but women's *voices* often do not carry throughout BAPS. They sometimes remains "*in the closet*" (as stated by one devotee) among the women and girls who make up the Women's Wing. Williams writes, "The relative position of men and women in the sect remains one of the most serious problems to be faced by leaders as they plan for growth in the urban centers and abroad."⁷² BAPS may find itself at odds with the future generations of women, especially those who have grown up in the United States, having been taught simultaneously to succeed educationally and professionally among men, but to keep their spiritual discourses and achievements in closed groups of women. Some of them find inequity in the fact that while women can and do listen to religious discourse of men, men cannot hear the discourse of women. The crucial distinction remains – that no matter how advanced in learning, piety, or social status a woman becomes, she cannot exercise authority over men.⁷³ Regardless of a woman's power in the temple, her relative prestige remains second to a man's. The irony lies in the fact that the teachings and social reforms of Lord Swaminarayan, once intended for the improvement of women's lives, have resulted in an ethical code that now seems to devalue what women have to offer. And in the contemporary setting of the Atlanta temple, even by the most quantifiable standards, quality of education, career aspirations, professional success, and economic upward mobility – never mind the

⁷² Williams, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hinduism*. 146.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 145.

conjecture that women's bhakti is superior to that of men's – second generation women have a great deal of talent to offer.

When boys express doubts and frustrations about life, even about their situations on "foreign soil," Swamiji meditates and soothes their minds and hearts. A chapter from Pramukh Swami Maharaj's biography entitled "Swamishri and Children" tells only stories about the communication between Pramukh Swami and boy devotees:

Swamishri cares and acknowledges the presence of youths whenever they come to see him . . . A youth came to Swamishri for a personal talk. In revealing his problem he broke down. Swamishri wiped his tears with his own upper cloth, consoled him and inspired strength and confidence. That young man still cherishes those golden moments of love and care that Swamishri offered him.⁷⁴

One mother expressed jealousy at her son's ability to mingle with the saints and to see Pramukh Swami face-to-face, but added,

I personally feel that women are stronger. They feel closer to him than men do sometimes. I mean, they [males] can go hear him talk and see him, and whatever, I mean, they take it for granted. So for us, we know better (I 2003).

The sadhus take personal interests in the spiritual development of male satsangis. Women have to take more initiative and personal responsibility for their own spiritual growth. Who with prestige or status can answer the questions and concerns of the girls? The absence of female saints and religious experts leaves only the adult female lay volunteers to address the younger generation of girls in BAPS. As volunteers with responsibilities of their own families and careers, these women lay leaders take on the huge task of transmitting values of their tradition. In these values lie gender roles that appear incongruous with their liberated lifestyle and education.

Despite an apparent lack of prestige of the women's wing, women do find power within it. Lay leaders serve as trusted friends and role models. The single-sex

⁷⁴ Shree Mukulbhai Kalarthi, *Idol of Inspiration -- Pramukh Swami Maharaj*, First ed. (Ahmedabad: Swaminarayan Aksharpith). 62

groups provide not only religious education, but also a place for participants to voice concerns, share joys and form long lasting friendships and alliances. Uncensored by male participants or leaders, women voice issues concerning their roles and creatively begin to change them. In joining together, they engage in vital temple activities and find ways in which to assert their power from within their traditional roles. This power may not be obvious at first glance. During the 1991 Cultural Festival of India women engineered the production of food for masses of people. They did this behind the scenes, but it was no small undertaking as the festival drew over one million people in its month long duration. Indian immigrants regard food as an integral facet of Indian culture and therefore the preparation of food for festivals and for prashad in temples embodies that vital function in the *transmission of culture*, the BAPS tradition's first goal in a new land. Yet in the setting of the U.S. to a western feminist, or even to a second or third generation female 'insider,' these roles of food preparation and festival creation do not seem particularly updated from traditional roles in the Indian context.

Philosopher Uma Narayan finds nonwestern feminist politics and western feminist epistemological trends sometimes at odds. She asserts that the nonwestern feminist cannot yet afford to "echo uncritically" the positivist themes of western feminism that seek to restore the value to "women's experience" without the risk of having their criticisms drowned out by "the louder and more powerful voice of traditional discourse, which will then claim that 'what those feminists say' vindicates its view that the roles and experiences it assigns women have value and that women should stick to those roles."⁷⁵ Indeed, many would assert that Swaminarayan Hinduism serves a patriarchal agenda, which attempts to keep women in certain roles

⁷⁵ Uma Narayan, "The Project of Feminist Epistemology: Perspectives from a Nonwestern Feminist," in *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing*, ed. Alison M. Jaggar and Susan Bordo (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers, The State University, 1989), 259.

by applauding them for their successes. Swaminarayan women may not resist patriarchal ideologies when they negotiate authority from within traditional roles, yet they subtly push the edge of the envelope and resist them by expanding their roles to include teaching in the temple and performing seva by volunteering in social service outside the temple. Globally, in the United States, and in Atlanta specifically, such new roles of power for women in the temple are very important. In their responsibility as the inherently more faithful "bearers of culture" or "keepers of the faith," women perform the task which has been identified as the most fundamental of all in a new land, that of transmission to future generations. In their role as teachers and perpetuators of culture, women's power is arguably parallel to that of men.

Perhaps the most innovative role for Swaminarayan Hindu women is that of voluntarism. BAPS women engage in an enormous amount of social service around the world to promote literacy, health and welfare for women and families. Their actions and social service activities appear as strong as or stronger than those of men based on the global information provided through the BAPS web site, and also locally, in Atlanta, given the fact that a woman runs that temple's most significant outreach service program, the BAPS Care medical clinic. As educators and volunteers, women strive to make a difference not only in their own private sphere of home, but also in their larger local and global public spheres of temple and world community. These involvements enable women to cross the traditional threshold of domesticity and participate in civil society.

Women certainly do have a strong presence in Swaminarayan religion, and to quickly equate gender separation with marginalization of women would be a fallacy. They have worked within the confines of separate spaces, and have created a system of power uniquely their own. Working without a great deal of prestige and with less visibility and authority than men, women determine what facets of the religion are

important and available to them and they thrive within those realms. Swaminarayan women find pride and empowerment from within their religious tradition, rather than from feminist theory, and “reclaim” their founder’s contribution to the history of gender reform.⁷⁶ They have also translated cherished traditional domestic roles into valuable temple and public services.⁷⁷ In negotiating their own forms of power, they have taken their “uplifted” position to greater heights.

Because the liberalizing of some gender roles and other social norms, such as women’s roles in serving prashad, and the elimination of caste regulations for priests, which has accompanied the expansion of Swaminarayan Hinduism in the global context, devotees might begin to question the contemporary progressiveness of the separation of men and women. Whether the majority of second and third generations of Swaminarayan women will adhere to the roles prescribed by their religion remains to be seen. How will they raise their own daughters? Will the rules dictating such strict separation of men and women in the Swaminarayan tradition die out in the United States in similar fashion to the way caste preferences in marriage have deteriorated for Asian Indian immigrants? Will BAPS begin training women for sainthood? According to devotees with whom I spoke, this seems highly unlikely, and in their words, “*impossible*.” But perhaps the tradition may make room for some kind of female religious specialists who could serve as role models and give full time attention to education in the Ladies Wing. Fenton predicts:

⁷⁶ For a similar conclusion about nonwestern immigrant women finding empowerment from within their own tradition rather than from western feminism, see Cynthia Keppley Mahmood and Stacy Brady, *The Guru's Gift: An Ethnography Exploring Gender Equality with North American Sikh Women* (Mountain View, California: Mayfield, 2000).

⁷⁷ Waghorne. Joanne Waghorne notes a similar instance in her account women's roles at the Sri Siva Vishnu temple in Maryland.

As generations pass, the Indian religions transplanted in to American cultural soil should look more and more like uniquely American variations of the parenting religious tradition. Although they can be expected to express continuity with their origins, they will, inevitably, become native.⁷⁸

Ten years ago, sadhus in the tradition were not permitted to live outside of India. Today seven live in the United States and serve temples here, and five of these men were born and raised in the United States. In an effort to guide lay leaders in the United States and other parts of the world, Pramukh Swami recognized the need for a transformation in the training of religious specialists so that they could address the needs of the growing transnational sanstha.⁷⁹ In doing so, he has attracted young Swaminarayan men from all over the world as sadhu initiates. Sociologists Yang and Ebaugh write that because of the position of the United States as a core country in the contemporary world-system, "Immigrant religious communities in the United States are in a powerful position to exert influence in their countries of origin and possibly in other parts of the world as well."⁸⁰ Perhaps the United States sanstha will continue to persuade modifications to Swaminarayan Hinduism, as it becomes "native" to America, in a way that will affect the religion globally. Williams notes also that the guru tradition of Hinduism accommodates growth and change according to social conditions:

Yet, as they apply the teachings of the past to the present experience of the devotees and interpret the teachings for modern social conditions, the possibility exists of development and evolutionary change . . . The balance of continuity and change in the tradition is an expression of and consonant with the guru tradition of Hinduism in which the sacred tradition is transmitted by and studied with a religious specialist who has the authority to adapt the tradition to the needs of the disciple.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Fenton. x.

⁷⁹ Raymond Brady Williams, "Training Religious Specialists for a Transnational Hinduism : A Swaminarayan Sadhu Training Center," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 66 Wint 1998, p 841-862 (1998).

⁸⁰ Fenggang Yang and Helen Rose Ebaugh, "Transformations in New Immigrant Religions and Their Global Implications," *American Sociological Review* 66, no. April (2001): 284.

⁸¹ Williams, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hinduism*. 191-92.

The situation for Swaminarayans in the United States varies from that in Britain, East Africa and other nations because of the easier integration Indians have experienced. Due to the nature of immigration laws and the democratic encouragement of religious pluralism, Indians in the U.S. have had much economic success and relatively easy cultural adaptation. This successful integration into American society has also made staying here permanently a reality that many never intended. As the network of temples and the sadhu tradition grow in the United States, and as leaders reinterpret traditions, we may find a uniquely American version of Swaminarayan Hinduism, perhaps one co-woven by women and men born and raised here. Many questions remain unanswered, yet this researcher holds that the maintenance and stability of the religion in its new global environment will depend equally on the careful transmission of the tradition to the younger generations of males *and* females.

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