

**“New New Religions” in North America:
The Swaminarayan Family of Religions**

J. Gordon Melton

Baylor University, Waco, Texas

Jgordon_Melton@baylor.edu

ABSTRACT: The Swaminarayan movement, which emerged in the early nineteenth century in the Indian state of Gujarat, has grown into a significant Indian sectarian group through the twentieth century. After 1965, it began to expand in America, and has emerged into a family of almost a dozen individual new religious movements, notable for the large temples they have erected. Their presence calls for an expanded focus of interest by new religions scholars, to include those diverse groups that have emerged into prominence on the religious landscape in the twenty-first century.

KEYWORDS: Swaminarayan, Hinduism, Vaishnava Hinduism, Hinduism in America, New Religious Movements in America.

Sahajanand Swami

The Swaminarayan movement holds a particular status within the modern development of religion in India. This reformist Hindu movement initially appeared in the Indian state of Gujarat in the early nineteenth century, as a new religious sect within the larger milieu of Krishna-oriented Vaishnava Hinduism (Dave 1996; Kim 2000; Williams 1984; Williams, 2001). While plainly a new religious thrust, which founded its own new temples and made significant innovations on the tradition, it emerged just as Britain was assuming control of India, and prior to the massive arrival of Christian missionaries through the middle of the century. As such, it preceded the India-wide response to the spread of Christianity and the resultant Hindu Renaissance, the Renaissance leadership’s search for the essence of Hinduism, and the move of the new set of Indian-based

religion into a confrontation with the modern world. The Swaminarayan movement certainly stands over against the many guru-led spiritual movements that became so important in introducing Western believers to various forms of modernized Hinduism in the last half of the twentieth century.

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

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

The Swaminarayan Movement grew out of the group begun around Shree Sahajanand Swami (1781–1830), a monk who would become revered toward the end of his life as Lord Swaminarayan. From the days of his childhood in the state of Uttar Pradesh in north central India, Sahajanand manifested an inclination to the religious life. When he was eleven, his parents died, and he adopted the life of a renunciate. The remainder of his life became a spiritual pilgrimage. He spent his teen years wandering through northern India, the last year of which was spent in the ashram of Sri Ramananda Swami (1738 or 1739–1802), a prominent Vaishnava teacher.

Ramananda’s most prominent disciple and heir apparent, Muktananda Swami (1758–1830), came to believe that the pious Sahajanand was, in fact, an incarnation of Krishna. Subsequently, when Ramananda died, Muktananda took the lead in naming Sahajanand as his successor, and under the name Ramananda had given him, Swami Narain or Swaminarayan, this relatively new addition to the community assumed leadership of the largest group of Ramananda’s devotees, who thus became the original core of the Swaminarayan movement. He was also from this time (1802), publicly revered as an incarnation of Krishna.

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

Despite the vast amount of material on Swaminarayan’s life and work (Koshalendraprasadji 2001; Mukuncharandas 1999; Trivedi 2014), including his own writings, reconstructing his life is difficult if not impossible. While we know much of what he did and taught, putting dates to his activities, ordering the events in his life along a timeline, and separating real occurrences from apocryphal tales remain problematic. We do know he placed a great emphasis on both personal and social morality, and imposed a strict ethical code on his followers and led efforts at social reform, most notably attacking the practice of *sati*, in which recent widows committed suicide by immolation on their late husband’s funeral pyre. Though a relatively rare phenomenon, with most cases being reported in Bengal, on the other side of India from where Swaminarayan resided, the practice was indicative of the low esteem granted widows in some parts of Indian culture.

Swaminarayan not only campaigned against the practice of *sati* (which he equated with common suicide), he moved to create a special place for widows who chose to live their life in devotion to Krishna. They would not be formally initiated into a nun’s role, but they were allowed to shave their hair, don special clothing, and receive the acknowledgement of the community for their ascetic choice

(Vijaytetram 2000). Today, the movement credits their founder with having successfully eradicated *sati* from most areas of Gujarat (Mukuncharandas 1999).

He also moved against the practice of infanticide, there being several subgroups in Gujarat who were accused of killing their female infants to avoid the dowry payments that would be incurred at the time of their later marriage. Swaminarayan's contemporary followers credit their founder with helping to eradicate this practice across Gujarat.

The ethical system assembled by Swaminarayan, and written down in his major writing, the *Shikshapatri*, set the reformist tone of what otherwise would have simply been another variant Krishna devotional (*bhakti*) movement (Vijaytetram 2000). The reformist tendencies began with the five vows which all devotees took, which required them to refrain from stealing, committing adultery, eating meat, partaking of intoxicants, and receiving food or water from "someone from whom one is not allowed to under the guidelines of the caste system." Those who went on to become ascetics took additional vows that included strict separation from members of the opposite sex and a renunciation of all worldly possessions.

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

Organizing the Movement

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

appointed the *sadhus* (the monks who had taken renunciate vows) to head the various temples, and further, also named the lay temple administrators who, unlike the *sadhus*, could handle money and interact with female members. The gradual separation of spiritual and temporal authority in the group led to the most important decisions relative to the succession of authority at the time of Swaminarayan’s death.

In 1826, Swaminarayan turned to his own family and his two brothers, Ramapratap and Ichcharama, both of whom had married and fathered children, and adopted two of their sons. He then installed them as *acharyas* (or preceptors) to head the movement. At this time, he divided Gujarat into two areas, beginning at Dwarka and extending eastward toward Bengal. Ayodhyaprasad (1809–1868), Ramapratap’s son, was appointed the *acharya* of the NarNarayan Dev Gadi, or Northern division, based in Ahmedabad, whilst Raghuveer (1812–1863), the son of Ichcharama, became the *acharya* of the LaxmiNarayan Dev Gadi, or Southern division, based in Vadtal. Each jurisdiction, sometimes comparable to a Christian diocese, contained a large temple in their headquarters city and several additional temples constructed during Swaminarayan’s lifetime. The six temples that were constructed during Swaminarayan’s earthly life have become the most sacred sites of the movement (Vyas n.d.).

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

Swaminarayan thus left the movement with a bifurcated authority system. Spiritual authority was largely given to the *sadhus*, the renunciates, who were expected to lead a holy life, most notably manifest by their vows of poverty to the point of not even handling money, and celibacy, which included the additional restriction of not having even the slightest contact with females. Temporal authority fell entirely to the *acharyas*, selected from members of Swaminarayan’s

own family, and the authority and power of the *acharyas* grew through the century, as new issues arose, and as the movement grew and the members became more affluent.

The two *acharyas* grew wealthy and between them controlled all the movement's property. Though expected to be detached from the wealth they acquired, the amount they controlled and used left them open to charges of corruption. In addition, the temporal duties mingled with some of the essential spiritual tasks. After seeing to the initiation ceremonies for new *sadhus*, for example, they were expected to pay for their mundane needs of food, clothing, and shelter. They also oversaw the various educational and charitable services delivered by the movement. Perceptions that an *acharya* was not living up to the high standards that had been set for him, or was neglecting his duties, could become a crisis moment for the movement as a whole, and prepare a path toward schism.

Swaminarayan Divided

Trouble developed within the Swaminarayan movement early in the twentieth century. In 1899, the Southern division at Vadtal had installed Lakshmiprasad (1892–1909) as its new *acharya*. Within a few years, however, it became evident that he was not living up to his role. Unable to resolve the issue otherwise, in 1906 an assemblage of leaders, both *sadhus* and householders, formally deposed him. By this time, there had arisen in the Vadtal temple a popular *sadhu*, Swami Yagnapurushdas (1865–1951), later known as Shastri Maharaj. These events followed on the heels of a succession dispute in the Northern division of the movement when the will of the *acharya* Purushottamprasad (1870–1901), who died in 1901, designated as his successor his adopted son Vasudevprasad (1899–1937), who was at the time only two years old. Another claimant to the position, an adult, took the issue to court where it was resolved in the child's favor.

Shastri Maharaj was a vocal critic of the life at the Vadtal temple, and especially targeted his fellow *sadhus* whom he saw as following a relaxed discipline. He complained that they did not keep their ritual observances, were accumulating wealth, and had contact with female devotees. The *sadhus'* lax life, in the context

of Lakshmiprasad’s failure, led Shastri Maharaj to a most radical idea. He suggested, contrary to what the movement had unanimously assumed since Swaminarayan’s death, that Swaminarayan had actually appointed a close confidant and fellow ascetic, Swami Gunatitanand (1785–1867), as his spiritual successor—not the two lay *acharyas*. In making his case, he highlighted a promise that Swaminarayan would remain always present within the movement in the person of his chief successor. Shastri Maharaj would trace an alternative lineage of Swaminarayan succession from Gunatitanand to Pragji Bhakta (1829–1897) to himself (Amrutvijaydas 2006, 2014).

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

All three of the Swaminarayan groups, the two original groups and the new BAPS organization, prospered and found themselves on an upward trajectory through the twentieth century, though each suffered multiple schisms. In 1942, for example, Muktajivandas (1907–1979), a prominent *sadhu* in the Northern division, withdrew and founded a separate jurisdiction, or *gadi*, which grew under the name the Swaminarayan Gadi. Muktajivandas reached some of the same conclusions as had Shastri Maharaj four decades earlier, namely that leadership through a householder lineage was not what Swaminarayan had intended. He traced the true lineage, however, through another prominent nineteenth century *sadhu*, Gopalananda (1781–1852). Muktajivandas headed the small *gadi* he founded for more than three decades. In 1972, he proclaimed himself the personification of the organization and thus it was proper to acknowledge his divine status. Subsequently, images of him began to appear in all the temples under his care (Anon. 2005).

Integral to his new lineage, Muktajivandas further championed the notion that Swaminarayan, in order to keep the promise to remain among his disciples, had taken birth a second time in the person of Jeevanpran Abji Bapashree (1845–1928), a well-known *sadhu* from the north of Gujarat. According to Muktajivandas, Ishwarcharandasji Swami (d. 1942), the *sadhu* through whom he received his lineage, had ordered Muktajivandas to install *murtis* of Abji Bapashree next to those of Swaminarayan in all the temples.

More recently (1987), Swami Devnandandasji (1933–2019), also known as H.D.H. Bapji, who acknowledged the lineage of the Swaminarayan Gadi through Ishwarcharandasji Swami and the divine status of Abji Bapashree, established the independent Swaminarayan Mandir Vasna Sanstha. As the leader of one of the smaller Swaminarayan groups, in 1996 Bapji designated a piece of land located between Ahmedabad and Gandhinagar in Gujarat, where he wished that a new center for the movement (a heavenly abode or “dham”) be built. The land was subsequently purchased, and the main building completed in 2001 (Anon. 2001).

In 1947, Swami Dharmajivandas (1901–1988) left the Vadtal temple to launch an educational movement that provided support and schooling for high school and college students. The new organization, the Swaminarayan Gurukul, incorporated separately but remained in relationship to the Southern division. However, in the 1970s, the group opened a hostel in the territory of the Northern division adjacent to Gujarat University in Ahmedabad, and Swami Dharmajivandas was unable to persuade either *acharya* to perform the formal installation ceremony for the hostel’s temple room. From that time, the Swaminarayan Gurukul has continued as a separate organization, overseeing its own autonomous centers and temples, but never formally making the final break with the larger movement (Anon. 1996; Anon. 2003; Anon. n.d.).

In 1966, the BAPS organization excommunicated a prominent lay preacher Dadubhai Patel (1918–1986) (popularly known as Kakaji) and his brother Bapabhai Patel (1916–2006) (popularly known as Papaji). As a result of their leaving, three new and separate Swaminarayan groups would emerge. During the 1950s, Kakaji was important in the spread of the BAPS organization in East Africa, and in the early 1960s began to raise up a movement of dedicated youth who entered an ordered devoted life, though without the full vows of a *sadhu*. In the mid 1960s, Kakaji began to create a similar structure for young women.

Meanwhile, as this youth movement was proceeding, questions were raised about Kakaji’s preaching activity in Africa, where he had both recruited some dedicated young women into the ordered life and raised money to support the proposed new center for the young female devotees. At this point, the BAPS leadership decided that Kakaji had overstepped his authority in promising initiation to the young women. Thus in 1966, both Kakaji and Papaji were excommunicated from the BAPS organization.

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

The young women’s movement followed a path similar to the Anoopam Mission. Papaji assumed leadership of the movement, named Gunatit Jyot (in honor of Swami Gunatitanand, the *sadhu* through whom the BAPS organization traced their lineage from Swaminarayan). Papaji served as Gunatit Jyot’s inspirational leader for the rest of his life. It developed as a female ordered community and, while much smaller than its male counterpart, created several centers in India and more recently abroad. Kakaji died in 1986, and was succeeded by a close associate, Hariprasad Swamiji (b. 1934), who currently leads the Yogi Divine Society.

The Southern division headquartered at Vadtal began the new century with a major organizational problem concerning the leadership of their *acharya*, a dispute that landed them in court. In 2000, the court ruled against the *acharya* and removed Maharajshree Ajendraprasadji (b. 1949) from office. Accepting the ruling, the main body of the organization moved ahead and selected a new *acharya*, Rakeshprasadji (b. 1966). Meanwhile, Maharashtra Ajendraprasadji did not accept the jurisdiction of the court in the case, nor its action. With the minority that continued to support him, he organized the Shree Swaminarayan

Agyna—Upasana Satsang Mandal, and continued to claim his office as the Vadtal *acharya* and the rights and authority that comes with that office. The members of the Mandal affirm him as the true lineage holder, which has traditionally been passed through Swaminarayan's family.

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

Swaminarayan to the West

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

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

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



Figure 1. The Swaminarayan BAPS Temple in Los Angeles.

During the first decade of the twenty-first century, the American branch of the BAPS organization has assumed a high profile as a result of its having constructed four large temples in the midst of four of the largest Indian American communities (Houston, Atlanta, Chicago, and Los Angeles). The Atlanta temple has been cited as the largest Hindu temple outside of India, while the only slightly smaller but very similar temple in suburban London is now the largest Hindu temple in Europe. News coverage of its temple openings have eclipsed the presence of the rival elements of the movement on the web, though the two older parts of the movement remain the largest groups in India.

The older Swaminarayan groups have a major asset—the many artifacts owned and used by their founder, including several items Swaminarayan presented as *prasad* (sacred souvenirs) to his many followers. A few such items are on display in their various temples around the world, but a concentrated collection had been assembled at their museum in Ahmedabad. The BAPS temple in Delhi, dedicated in 2007, was briefly acknowledged as the largest Hindu temple in the world, though the International Society for Krishna Consciousness’ temple in Mayapur, West Bengal, has more recently been touted as the world’s largest.

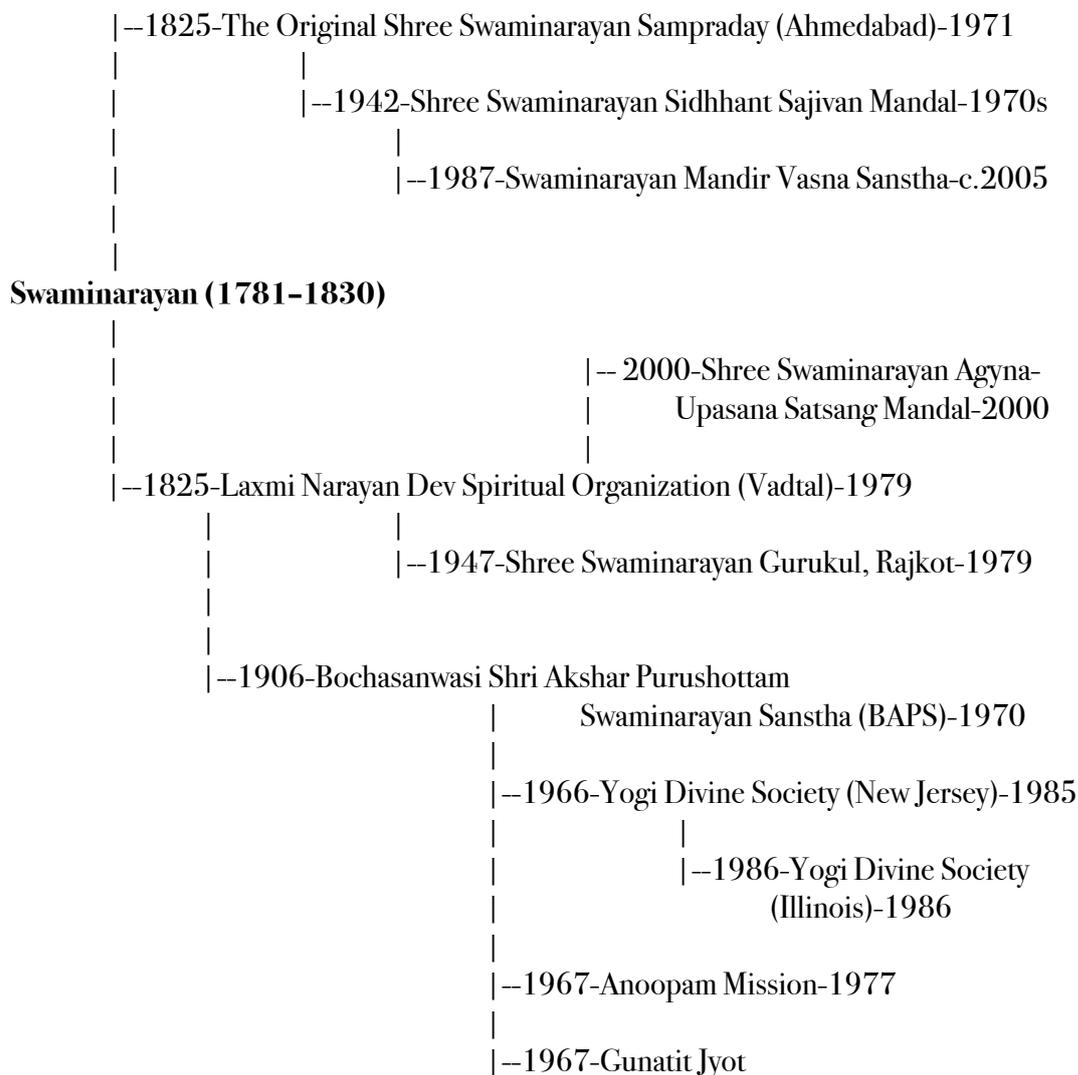


Table 1. The Swaminarayan Tradition in America. The dates before the name of each group indicates its date of original formation, and following each group, its formation in the United States.

Swaminarayan in the United States

Following the change of United States immigration laws in 1965, the largest recognizable segment of new residents from India to enter the country were of a Gujarati background. Joining the early immigrants were members of the BAPS organization, who settled in what has become one of the largest Asian American communities in North America, in and around Flushing, Queens, just minutes from New York’s JFK International Airport. The BAPS members who originally settled in the area founded the first Swaminarayan temple in a private house in 1971, and began constructing the building to house it immediately across the street from the Ganesh temple, the oldest traditional Hindu temple in the country. The international leader of the BAPS movement arrived for his first visit in 1974 and formally installed the deities in the original *mandir* (temple). He returned in 1977 to dedicate and reinstall the deities in the permanent temple on Browne Street (Williams 1988, 162–64; Anon. 2007a, 2007b, 2017). Thus the BAPS movement got a head start on the other segments of the Swaminarayan movement and continued to out distance them as the Indian American community grew year by year. Its leader regularly visited the country, and its more centralized organization allowed quicker responses to the developing work.

The two older Swaminarayan organizations were somewhat slower to organize in the United States, but on a visit to members in 1978, Tejendraprasadji Maharajshri (b. 1944), the head until 2004 (when he retired) of what is termed in the West the Original Shree Swaminarayan Sampraday (Under Shree Nar Narayan Dev Gadi), the Northern Swaminarayan jurisdiction headquartered in Ahmedabad, established the International Swaminarayan Satsang Organization (ISSO) a missionary society designed to coordinate efforts to build the movement abroad. The two older groups had been somewhat stymied as the geographical boundaries which separated the two jurisdictions in India did not function in the West. ISSO, however, was designed to facilitate cooperation between the two groups, and, since the Northern division’s *acharya* was much more active in North America, the Ahmedabad group grew much faster. It would be the late 1980s before temples loyal to the Southern division were organized.

The Ahmedabad group established an initial temple, originally located in a private home, in 1981 in Weehawken, New Jersey (immediately across the Hudson River from New York City). In 1986, the Weehawken group purchased

the building formerly used by the Church of Christ, Scientist, which in 1987, was dedicated as a *mandir* and has subsequently served as the headquarters of the Northern division (Sullivan 2001). After its initial organization, the Original Shree Swaminarayan Sampraday has moved rapidly, and now has a set of associated temples in almost all of the Indian American communities across the country.

Meanwhile, through the 1980s, members of the Vadtal group in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex organized, and in 1989 purchased a former church building in suburban Grand Prairie. Two years later, on July 4, 1991, *acharya* Maharajshree Ajendraprasadji, the then leader of the Vadtal Swaminarayan group, known in the United States as the Laxmi Narayan Dev Spiritual Organization, visited. He dedicated the *mandir* and formally installed the deity statues. The progress of the American wing of the Vadtal group was somewhat blunted by Ajendraprasadji's problems that led in 2000 to his removal from office by action of the court in India. The group existed for several years without an *acharya* before the present leader, Rakeshprasadji, assumed office (2003). The new *acharya* has been less effective in growing his movement overseas, and the American branch has shrunk, with only two temples remaining loyal.

The Vadtal schism has been responsible for the most recent Swaminarayan group to manifest in the United States—the Shree Swaminarayan Agyna-Upasana Satsang Mandal, which continues the leadership of the deposed Southern division (Vadtal) *acharya*, Maharajshree Ajendraprasadji. As the Indian court ruling has no effect outside of the country, Ajendraprasadji was able to establish an American headquarters temple in New Jersey to serve those members who remained loyal to him, and he had success in wooing members to his cause, especially in New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. His strongest single American center is the former Vadtal temple in the Chicago suburb of Wheeling, Illinois, that switched its affiliation to the Mandal. The stance of the Wheeling temple was not surprising, as it had originally been dedicated by Ajendraprasadji personally when he visited the United States in 1991. He also now has an affiliated temple in suburban Atlanta and additional growing centers of activity, yet to establish their own temples, in other Indian American communities across the United States.

Even before the first BAPS temple was organized, in 1970, Muktajivandas, the founder of the Swaminarayan Gadi, made his first trip to North America to

organize followers. During this trip, accompanied by several *sadhus*, he visited the New York City Metropolitan area, Chicago, Washington D.C., Seattle, and the Niagara Falls area. He also founded the Shree Swaminarayan Sidhant Sajivan Mandal, USA, and established its first temple located in Seattle, Washington.

In 1979, Acharya Shree Purushottampriyadasji Swami (b. 1942), who had accompanied Muktajivandas on the 1970s visit, became the new leader of the movement. At that time, he founded the temple in Secaucus, New Jersey, which currently serves as the group’s headquarters temple. In steps, the group was able to move from rented facilities to their own property and finally was able to construct a large temple, at which the formal opening and deity installation ceremony was held in 2001.

The groups associated with the Yogi Divine Society also established work in the United States. Kakaji initially toured the United States in June 1973, visiting numerous locations across the Eastern half of the country. Among the people he met was Dinkarbai Patel (b. 1944, affectionately known as Dinkar Uncle), an engineer residing in suburban Chicago. Through the remainder of the decade, he became an increasingly devout follower and, following the death of his wife, took a vow of celibacy. In 1981, Kakaji formally installed a *murti* of Swaminarayan in Dinkar Uncle’s Waukegan home, thus transforming it into a *mandir*. Before his passing, Kakaji also installed a *murti* of Gunatitanand Swami in the *mandir*. Dinkar Uncle now leads two Yogi Divine temples in Chicago’s northern suburbs (the second being in a home in Des Plaines).

Meanwhile, Kakaji’s successor in India, Hariprasad Swamiji (b. 1934), initially visited the United States in 1985. He continues as head of the Yogi Divine Society in India, but has no administrative role in the Illinois temples, which are also not listed as YDS temples by the Society’s headquarters. He is more directly the leader of two American temples, the largest being Haridam, the Hindu Swaminarayan Temple & Cultural Center in Lake Hiawatha, New Jersey. This temple was formally established in 1996, and has acquired a meeting hall designed to accommodate some 1,300 attendees. The other temple under his care is in Delaware, Ohio.

The Anoopam Mission and the Gunatit Jyot have both established a single American center that serves affiliated followers nationally. The Anoopam Mission headquarters is located in Coplay, Pennsylvania, the organization having grown

following founder Guruvarya Param Pujya Sahebji's initial visit to the United States in 1973. The relatively small Gunatit Jyot has a small center in New Jersey.

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

Observations

This excursion in the evolving Swaminarayan community offers a variety of observation on the larger world of new religious movements (NRMs). First, several Indian-American groups led by gurus were prominent among those movements that entered the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and soon emerged as among the most prominent targets of the new cult awareness movement—the Sikh Dharma/3HO of Yogi Bhanjan (1929–2004), The Divine Light Mission of Guru Maharaji (b. 1957), the Sai Baba Organization, and so on. Indeed, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), an expression of the Indian Vaishnava *bhakti* movement of Bengal, supplied the most popular image for media coverage of the “cults” for several decades. In the new century, however, ISKCON, which began with several thousand Western converts, has become dominated by first generation Indian American immigrants, and has largely been accepted for what it claimed to be all along, just another traditional Hindu group.

Since the media attention to new religions has waned, a variety of Vaishnava *bhakti* groups have established themselves in the West, including several active in recruiting Westerners into their community. All arrived under the radar of both the cult awareness community and the scholarly world. In addition, several older Hindu groups that existed for many years as convert groups have in the last two decades been changed by an influx of devotees from India. While attention to

Islam replaced the media interest in new religions, the integration of convert groups into the growing Indian American Hindu community served to remove the guru groups from the cult awareness agenda. Simultaneously, scholarly papers on the new Hindu groups from a new religions studies perspective have become quite rare.

Second, the continued growth and splintering of the Swaminarayan community points to the larger history of new religions. Scholarship on new religions, lest we forget, began with questions of the seemingly unique situation of the late 1960s, and we wasted time exploring the role of the cultural upheavals of the period in causing the dramatic upswing in the formation of NRMs. That inquiry was informed by a popular hypothesis that quickly proved to have no foundation apart from secularization theories, namely that NRMs were little more than an epiphenomenal manifestation of social stress. We have now observed societies from around the world for the last forty years in as diverse places as Japan, North America, Western Europe, and Nigeria. The story is always the same, in free societies, new religions are constantly being formed in both more stressful and more calm times. The only places their appearance is limited are in societies where government power actively suppresses them—China and Saudi Arabia being prominent examples.

There are certainly social correlates to NRM formation—urbanization, government support of religious freedom, and population—but social unrest is not one of them. Religions, including new religious movements, are not epiphenomenal, they are an integral part of human culture. Like art and family life, religion changes and alters over time and place, governments seek to coopt and control it, and some individuals may live comfortably without it, but it keeps popping up in new and interesting ways wherever it is not actively suppressed by the sword.

In the United States, the passing of a series of anti-Asian immigration laws beginning in 1908 slowed and then almost stopped the development of Hinduism in the United States. The one necessary cause of its sudden revival in the late 1960s was the 1965 change in the immigration laws relative to India. While the coming of age of the baby boom generation supported the revival with a momentary increase in the number of prospective converts, and American urbanization brought them into the cities, without the legislative change, no Indian teachers/founders would have been present to recruit anyone to the

different forms of Hinduism. And neither the process of recruitment nor the introduction of new Hindu groups stopped with the aging of the baby boomers. Annually, for the last half-century, a new crop of prospective recruits and new Hindu groups for them to join have appeared as the Indian American community continues to grow.

Third, in studying the American segment of the Swaminarayan movement, during which time I have been invited to comment on several court cases that have involved American Hindu communities, I have again been reminded of the importance of property issues in determining the future of new religions. During their first generation, new groups have accumulated property, and new religious groups have frequently been lax in designating the ultimate ownership of that property. They will leave the second generation to fight over that property, and those factions that emerge as the owner most often claims the allegiance of the followers. Most Hindu temples in America are congregationally owned, but some branches of the Swaminarayan movement are prominent exceptions. As groups move out of homes and rented facilities, property ownership has already proved important in the split of the Yoga Divine Society, where local ownership of the home-based temples was significant, and the Vadtal group has seen the movement of the majority of their temples to the dissenting group formed by the *acharya* deposed in 2000.

The presence of almost a dozen Swaminarayan groups in the US, all of which are on growth trajectories at the moment, suggest a slight tweaking of our picture of new religions, which I suggest might aptly be seen as the foam formed by the fermenting elements of the religious community. Rather than seeing new religions in stages, as our Japanese colleagues did in proposing the category of “new new religions” to designate those groups formed by the second generation after World War II, we should see NRMs as those groups constantly being formed on the fringe of the older, more stable parts of the religious community, and those older fringe groups that are able to maintain a high tension with the religious establishment.

New religious tendencies are all around us. They appear as dissenting and innovative movements in established churches that at any time can separate from the parent body, such as the New Apostolic Reformation movement on the edge of Pentecostalism; sectarian movements that in a different context become new

religions, like the Swaminarayan groups; and new innovative religious impulses that synthesize a new religious gestalt.

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

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