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Indian Diaspora: Migration, Identity and Ethnicity (Part Two)

Introduction

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In Part One of this special issue themed, "Indian Diaspora: Migration, Ethnicity and Identity," we focused primarily on Hinduism in the Americas, specifically the United States and the Caribbean. In this second part, we shift away from a particular geographical focus to examine how diasporic Hinduism is embodied and performed, supports and challenges gendered norms, and is contested through oral and textual traditions, digital media, and secular spaces. Scholars of the present collection bring together a broad range of methodologies, theoretical frameworks and interdisciplinary approaches that work to highlight additional dimensions of diaspora as an interpretive category. We view the opportunity of the combined volumes as having the potential to expand generic associations of the homeland, authenticity-based performance, ethno-religious identities, and other singular categories that have come to be associated with the Indian diaspora.

In their article, "Pachrāt Song Tradition and Ritual Agency in Trinidad." Krystal Ghisyawan & Natasha Mahabir-Persad examines feminine spaces of worship which feature the lesser known Trinidadian folk songs known as pachrāt. Pachrāt songs are performed almost exclusively by women as part of communal worship offered in adoration to the goddess during spring *navarātri* celebrations. Ghisyawan and Mahabir-Persad argue that, pachrāt songs are vehicles for "small acts of resistance" and empowerment. Women who sing to the goddess are ritually transformed into collective agents of power as they pray for the welfare and prosperity of their village. The authors further show the many ways women actively engage in transmission of tradition by generationally preserving the songs through memory, protecting its continuity by teaching it to young women and girls, and innovating the songs in practice. This article challenges scholarship on Indo-Caribbean Hinduism which privilege orthodox organizations such as the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha. The Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha is the largest Hindu organization in the Caribbean but focusing solely on this organization oversimplifies the heterogeneity of folk traditions that have been practiced since indentureship and continue to be observed in adapted forms today. The work of Ghisyawan and Mahabir-Persad provides a necessary counterpoint to this trend.

In contrast to Ghisyawan and Mahabir-Persad's focus on women and the local manifestations of the Hindu tradition in Trinidad, Sucheta Kanjilal highlights the increasingly masculine narrative of Hinduism through her examination of how the muscular disposition of the *Mahābhārata* is emphasized for social and political agendas. In "Muscular *Mahābhāratas*: Masculinity and Transnational Hindu Identity," Kanjilal gives important attention to the re-fashioning of hypermasculine identity in transnational spaces to suggest that it is a departure from Gandhi's 'passive resistance' and the colonial framing of Indians as the 'effeminate native.' Kanjilal points out that the gendering of the political bodies is a recurring theme which aligns with India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi's, national discourse and global aims predicated upon Hindu traditions and notions of physical fitness. However, as Kanjilal argues, the preoccupation with narratives that feature warrior-masculinity tends to gloss over the depth of values, gender identities and political rhetoric sourced in multivalent Hindu traditions. This masculine and militaristic nationalism "type" of Hinduism which spreads through transnational and global networks contributes to ethno-religious and gendered articulations of Hindu citizenry.

Adding to the discussion on transnationalism, Deepali Kulkarni in, "Digital Mūrtis, Virtual Darśan and a Hindu Religioscape" lends insight into the expanding field of religion and virtual spaces, as she argues that transnational aspects of Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminaryan Sanstha (BAPS) is a religioscape constituted in part by the *darśan* of the guru. Kulkarni looks specifically at images and videos of the guru in temples, on temple websites, and on apps to determine if the interchange between the guru and the discipline inherent in *darśan* exists the same way virtually. Unlike Aisha M. Beliso-De Jesús' (2015) argument on copresences which discusses the aural, textual, and electrical currents within video devices that allows from the transmission of the spirits and blessings, Kulkarni's informants focus primarily on the visual components of videos which, she argues, creates a virtual, networked neighborhood that provides devotees with online experiences in-between that of a physical *murti* of the guru and that of the presence of the guru in-person. Most importantly, this virtual space allows for layered *darśan*—the devotee receives *darśan* from both the deity as well as the guru. This layered *darśan* amplifies the importance of seeing the divine. In addition, Kulkarni points out that recorded videos and live feeds of the gurus allow him to be present in multiple locations at the same time—bridging the gap between the guru and the disciple. Kulkarni's work offers much needed attention on the complexities of cyber engagement and access in the religosphere. Although the diaspora can create distances between devotees and their gurus, devotional cyber-realities offer a space for devotees of the guru to freely express their religiosity bereft of physical constraints. Notions of spatial and temporal proximity to the guru as well as *darśan*, become elastic categories bound only to access digital device and the devotee's desire to make a connection.

In the final article, "Secular Conflict: Challenges in the Construction of the Chino Hills BAPS Swaminarayan Temple" Aarti Patel continues this focus on BAPS but, like Kanjilal's article, returns to the political dimension to examine how Hindu immigrants of Chino Hills negotiated the construction of a Swaminarayan temple amid disputes with the local government and community. Patel notes that the zoning laws which at first restricted the height of the temple, were ultimately re-used to allow for the competition of the temple at its original intended height, demonstrating the ability of local laws to regulate religion. Despite getting early approval for their building, the members of the Chino Hill BAPS were denied their initial 80-foot building plan because of worries that the new structure would attract the "wrong type" of attention, create more traffic, and would not be in keeping with the "public vision" of the overall community. As Patel points out, while some of these concerns were genuine, they were also at times "pretexts for other, more discriminatory sentiments" such as the remarks of one resident in a letter to the City Council which complained that allowing for the temple would open the door for other "third world architecture" and would lead to Chino Hills looking like a "third world country." Two factors led to a reversal of the city council's decision, eventually permitting the temple to add 80-foot features to the building: (1) BAPS efforts to educate the larger public about Hinduism and the organization which included multiple charitable functions, and (2) the commercial billboard for a nearby mall which was higher than the 42-foot restriction initially placed on the temple and came to signify the unfair treatment of BAPS. Through her examination of the Chino Hill building process, Patel challenges the assumed secularity of U.S. laws and highlights the ways in which Hinduism in America, as a minority religion, must prove its worthiness and explain and defend its practices to the larger community in order to be approved by the same laws designed to protect their freedom.

The first two articles carefully examine gendered articulations of communal power. While Ghisyawan and Mahabir-Persad show how female agents join in worship to imbibe the power goddess, which then reinforces feminized ritual spaces, Kanjilal points out how the undeniably muscular nature of the *Mahābhārata*, contributes to hyper-masculine construction of a hegemonic Hindu identity. In each case, complex gendered identities become a functional tool for social change. From these two articles, we are also led to understand the distinct ways Hindus, who are spatially and ideologically apart, derive empowerment from the performance of oral and textual traditions. The second set of articles by Kulkarni and Patel explored under-examined aspects of the BAPS Swaminarayan tradition, demonstrating how the tradition transforms the digital and diasporic spaces it occupies, connects with other communities which are religiously or spatially separated from their own, and adapts the tradition to meet the needs of the local community.

Together, the articles in part one and two of this special edition of *Nidan*, challenge scholarship on the diasporic Hinduism which privilege notions of the homeland to the detriment of recognizing alternative modalities of practice and the ways in which

Hindu communities are sacralizing their local landscapes in conversation with the political environments of those locations. The emphasis in these articles on dynamic gendered realities and shifting notions of authenticity urge us to the view the diaspora as an elastic category complicated by guru-led movements and the layered histories of various migrations of Indians since the 19th century. Future scholarship on the Hindu diaspora needs to take seriously the history of these migrations, the interactions between various self-identified Hindu groups, and the ways in which the articulation of Hindu identities is a reflection of particular relationships and power structures.

References

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Pachrāt Song Tradition and Ritual Agency in Trinidad[1]

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Abstract

In this paper, we explore female-centred worship in St. Mary's Village, Oropuche, Trinidad, through the practice of an annual Kanya-Kumarie puja. In preparation for the puja, the women collect alms in the village while singing folk songs known as 'pachrāt'. Specifically used in Devi puja, the songs all honour the Devi and narrate the rituals they perform and their appeals to her divine power. These women were the only group who still performed pachrāt songs in Trinidad. They view the songs as part of their worship of the divine feminine through whose worship they feel empowered as protectors of the community and drivers of cultural retention and social development. In this paper, we document this practice of singing pachrāt, along with the feelings of empowerment derived from its practice. We emphasise the village, and its role in fostering a sense of home, community and family for formerly indentured workers. It cultivated an ethic of care and communalism, resulting in the women's empowerment as protectors and nurturers of the village.

Key words: pachrāt, Hinduism, Devi-worship, empowerment, religious patriarchy

Introduction

On the morning of April 10, 2016, a small crowd gathered in the front yard of Davi Boodram's house in St Mary's Village, South Oropouche, Trinidad. Ten women, aged late thirties to mid-seventies, along with three pre-pubescent girls, stood near the area where Davi sank *jhandi* flags into the dirt celebrating her worship of the Gods and marking her home as Hindu. A lone woman stood on the elevated concrete platform that framed the jhandi area in Davi's yard, beating a steady three beat rhythm on a small dholak hanging around her neck. Davi stepped onto the platform, holding a brass *loṭa* full of dhaar (sacred water offering) and topped with a red

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[1] Note: The translations and quotes from interviews are written in the colloquial Trinidadian English as spoken by the women, including local terms and spellings, with further translation where necessary. **Video clip of pachrāt songs available at:** https://youtu.be/hikcARqrRb8

arahu[2] flower. Every morning, Davi offered *jal* (water) to a particular deity. This morning, Davi's daughter Gaytree[3] had prepared a bucket full of special *dhaar* for the female divinity who is known by many names; even within this essay, this energy is referred to as Shakti, Devi, Durga, Aadi-Bhavani, and Kumarie, each a different embodiment or interpretation of the same feminine energy. Facing the already risen sun in the eastern sky, Davi clasped her hands around the broad vessel and began to softly sing the words, "Sumiro maiya aadi bhavani mahade maiya, sumiro maiya aadi bhavani." The crowd joined in with other women taking on the lead. Davi stopped singing and lifted the lota from where it was cradled between her breasts to touch the cold metal to her forehead. Her lips were moving. She was saying a silent prayer and singing along with the chant, occasionally sniffling or wiping away a tear from her cheek. The women present were all invited to offer a *loṭa* of *dhār*. Davi beckoned us (the authors) to make offerings as well. When we were all done, the group made its way up Davi's short but steep driveway to *mangey bheek*.

> The reason for the puja is to prevent sickness and disease from the village, when you pass through all the village and the people who contribute – they contribute rice, dhal, all the vegetarian stuff or they give money, whatever they offer, and we will buy it. Whoever contribute, it will protect their own family by preventing sickness and disease. When they pass through the village, it cleansing the village. The mangey bheek as we call it, is asking for this *bhiksha*, and the people who contribute to it, their family won't get any diseases. It must happen within the Nav Raatri, within the nine days, so sometimes it happened we had to go on Sunday and the puja is Monday, so we will buy everything before-hand, but whatever they contribute we don't keep it. We have to get it out of the house. They didn't contribute it for us, but for the puja, so we share it out, give it to the pundit, to old people, whoever might need it. (Gaytree Boodram, November 10, 2014).

In Trinidad, there is widespread observance of Nav Raatri twice annually, coinciding with the start of the Northern hemisphere's spring and fall seasons. Hinduism in Trinidad became somewhat creolised, with many practices that would have been specific to a region, being merged and incorporated into a broad standardised "Hindu" practice (van der Veer and Vertovec 1991). Religious groups formed in the early twentieth century, such as the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha in Trinidad, sought connections with homeland and strived to preserve Hindu practices (those they approved of and accepted). The SDMS is the largest of a number of religious organisations, operating schools and temples nationwide, having scholarships and exchange programs to share talent and knowledge between India and Trinidad, and sometimes other parts of the diaspora. Their attempts to standardise ritual practice

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[2] The *arahu/arhul* flower: the double-flowering hibiscus. Specifically used for Devi worship, that is Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswati, etc. In the Nav Durga Puja, the flowers are minced and mixed in the dhār. The flower symbolises beauty and fragrance (Mahabir 1991:11, cited by Winer, 2009:22)
[3] varied spelling of 'Gayatri'

give the impression of homogenised practice among South Asian migrants, but indentured workers came from diverse regional, linguistic and religious backgrounds. Most migrants indentured on British colonies in the Caribbean were from Bihar and the United Provinces, with fewer emigrants from Madras and Tamil Nadu (less than an eighth), and other minor provinces[4]. Regionalism in South Asia fostered many localised practices, such as certain deities being honoured through specific rituals or at particular festivals, further differentiated by caste. Hinduism practiced in the Caribbean today, while mainly influenced by North Indian Brahminical practices, borrows from a range of South Asian religious beliefs and practices.

Devi worship is commonplace in Hindu practice in the diaspora, although it is the more taboo aspects of Devi worship that have received social and scholarly attention (McNeal 2011, Singh and Stephanides 2000, Gopeesingh 2011). For instance, Gaiutra Bahadur briefly mentions the worship of Kali, the "dark aspect" of Durga as "popular among Indians in the West Indies during indentureship" with "unorthodox rituals of spirit possession and fire walking" (Bahadur 2014:177). Kali puja and its "unorthodox" practices (including animal sacrifices) are associated with Madrassi Hindus, a minority compared to workers from northern territories, who tended to be worshipers within the Vaishnavite Bhakti tradition, a path that extols the glories and praises of the avatars of Vishnu (Bahadur 2014). Scholars have noted the centring of the Ramayana text within Caribbean Hinduism with its idealised gender roles as a mechanism for encouraging Indo-Caribbean men and women to emulate these behaviours (Mohammed 2002). However, Sherry-Ann Singh (2011) noted "that while Sita was idealised for her womanly and wifely virtues, in the local Hindu tradition this figure never attained the prominence of the other, more aggressive and independent female deities such as Lakshmi, Durga and Kali" (Singh 2011:35); Sita is honoured alongside Ram, but is not singled out to have an entire prayer dedicated to her as other female deities are worshipped. Yet sufficient attention has not been given to the influences of Devi-worship and philosophy to gender systems in the Caribbean.

Regional differences were also undermined by the dominance of Bhojpuri, the dialect of the majority of migrants, with a creolised version developing over time in the Caribbean to replace other regional dialects (Look Lai 1993). A number of Bhojpuri folk song traditions in Trinidad, including the wedding songs and those associated with Phagwah *(chautāl, ulārā, chaitī and jhūmar)* were documented by ethnomusicologist Helen Myers (1998) based on her observations in Felicity, a village in central Trinidad. She, however, was unable to document pachrāt. In our search, by word of mouth, St Mary's village was the only group in Trinidad who sang the pachrāt songs, although other folk singers mentioned hearing of them.

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[4] Smaller numbers of indentured labourers were from Baluchistan, West Punjab, Bhopal, Kashmir and even Kabul; Punjab, Rajasthan, Bombay, Nepal.

During the Nav Raatri, *yagnas*, *pujas* and (in the fall) *Ramleela* performances take place nationwide. In St Mary's village, the spring Nav Raatri is commemorated with a Kanya-Kumarie puja open to the participation of the entire village. Many Devi Yagnas dedicate one night's worship to Kanya-Kumarie puja, where nine prepubescent girls[5] are worshiped as symbols of the birth of the Devi in multiple forms and bodies. Davi's house becomes the ritual space, with the puja and all of its preparations being done there annually. The mangey bheek is an essential part of their preparation. Derived from the word *bhiksha*, meaning 'alms', the women walk through their village, stopping at Hindu homes, collecting alms in the form of goods or money for the upcoming Durga puja. In this way, every home that contributed would receive the blessings as if having done the puja by their own hands, even though it is a small group of women, a *panchayat* (translated to 'assembly of five') or village council, who do the preparations and organising of the event.

We, the authors, met with this core of women in November of 2014 where we interviewed them and made audio and video recordings of the songs and some of the women's families' social histories. We spoke with five women: seventy-two years old Davi Boodram (DB), her middle-aged daughter Gaytree Boodram (GB), and daughter-in-law Wendy Lochan-Boodram (WL), Davi's neighbour Indra Deonarine-Kola (ID), and Deokie Raghunanan, fondly called Tanty Shugars (TS), Davi's long-time friend, almost like a sister to her (now deceased). Also present were Davi's two sons, who also chimed in about their experiences growing up as boys who, due to their proximity to the panchayat and the transformation of their home into a ritual space, we were able to witness this feminised space of worship. In this interview, the women shared their experiences with the puja, their connections to the songs, and the blessings of the Devi in their life.

At the termination of one's contract as an indentured worker in the British West Indian colonies, one could receive return passage to India or accept a parcel of land for settlement in the colony. Many chose to stay, and were given land in certain areas. This clustering of former indentured workers allowed the formation of villages, and created the circumstances for Indian customs to thrive. It was customary in South Asian villages for a collection of the elders and respected community members to make judgements and decisions on behalf of the welfare of the village. This traditional *panchayat raj* system, or "rule by an assembly of five" was adopted in many newly-formed Indian villages in Trinidad. Although panchayats rarely exist as a law-enforcing and peace-keeping body in Indo-Caribbean villages anymore, they may still serve the cultural and religious needs of the community, organising various community events throughout the year, including, Holi/Phagwah and Divali celebrations. In St Mary's Village, it is the spring Nav Raatri that is celebrated communally.

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[5] Although *kanya-kumarie* means the maiden/virgin girl, it is interpreted for the puja as prepubescent girls who have not yet begun menstruation. Menstrual blood is seen as an impurity.

Through the communal performance of the Kanya-Kumarie Puja and all its preparations, including the mangey bheek ceremony, the women foster a sense of community and sisterhood amongst themselves. They believe in the ritual's power to protect from disease and misfortune, or to herald success in various aspects of life and are thus empowerment through performing the puja. The village represents family and community, but as the context of this puja, the village is the ritual space that is symbolically transformed by the women's spiritual praxis. While in this article, we focus on the pachrāt songs and the women's ritual agency, we give attention to the social organisation of the village, as these women have experienced it throughout their lives. Their perceived role within the village is one of the main drivers for their annually hosting this Kanya-Kumarie puja. We showcase several of the pachrāt songs, while discussing the women's ritual agency as they navigate village life. This paper is organised around the life events of the two matriarchs we interviewed, Deokie Raghunanan (Tanty Shugars) and Davi Boodram, beginning with their families' arrival in the village, the women's youth and childhood, their adult life as wives and mothers, and finally, closing with a query on the future of life and religion in the village.

Coming to the Village

"*Bhaley ailo eh maiya balle ailo na, maiya jowne juniya pyerii mahanga bhaile towne juniya bhaley ailo nā*"- I'm lucky you come today Maiya; today the cotton get expensive, so thanks for coming, I glad you come today.

The lines of this song repeat over and over with only one word changed each time to list a different ingredient used in the worship of the Devi. The list includes *hardi* (turmeric), *kapura* (camphor), *langawa* (clothing), *sindura* (vermillion), *kangana* (sacred thread), *tikuli* (sacred mark on the forehead with sandalwood paste or powder), *dudhana* (milk), and *homiya* (the havan or sacred fire). Singing the *pachrāt* songs as they walk through the village collecting ingredients that would be used for puja, the women symbolically perform puja. In this particular song, they thank the Goddess for coming to the village. They honour her, knowing her journey to the village must have been difficult, as it has been for them. For the formerly indentured, most of whom had made the voyage alone, without kin or friend, the village became an important space for developing kin-like bonds, and creating close connections with others. Modelling these Caribbean villages on those of rural India, particularly north India, allowed for the creation of familiarity and comfort, and for the reproduction of Indian cultural and social beliefs (Gosine 2016). St Mary's village was a site for migrants to define community and family and to shape their forms of cultural expression.

Tanty Shugars' maternal grandfather, named Beepath, was only a year old when he came to Trinidad in 1845 with his parents. He lived in Tarouba with his mother,

while his father worked on a coconut estate in Oropuche. When Beepath married, he and his wife, who was from St James, moved to Oropuche as well, where Tanty Shugars' paternal grandfather, Ramu, was born. Ramu adopted a little girl, named Sumintra, who would one day give birth to Davi. While Davi and her elder sister were toddlers, Sumintra left, and their father, who found himself unable to work and care for two young children, decided to give one of them away to be fostered by another family. He found another woman in Sumintra's village, named Sookrajie Dwarika, who was willing to take Davi. Davi affectionately referred to Sookrajie as Moya. Moya herself had been adopted as a child. Her parents lived on an estate in Cedar Hill, but her father was murdered by a jealous overseer who desired her mother. After her husband's murder, Moya's mother suffered a nervous breakdown and walked with her three girls and baby boy from Cedar Hill to the coast at Oropuche, intending to drown them all in the sea. Seeing what was happening, Moya picked up her brother in her arms and ran to the villages, where they were taken in and raised.

Child-sharing or lending was common among working classes, who pooled resources in order to give everyone a better chance (Mohammed 2012). South Asians who undertook indentureship contracts, often did so alone, coming to new world plantations without families. Most men left their wives in their villages as was customary for migrant workers. The women most willing to make the journey were those who had lost the support of their families, such as widows, runaways, or women who were turned out for having brought shame to the home. Colonial rule however, made it difficult for single women to migrate, as they were often suspected to have run away from their husbands. The 1883 Indian Emigration Act (1883) was intended to stop wives from passing as widows or single women to escape their husbands. This prompted many women to find husbands on the depots or boats in order to circumvent this regulation and any investigation into their past. Coupling up at the depot or along the journey from the interior to the ports, new couples formed across caste and religion (Bahadur 2014). Still some women managed to make the journey unaccompanied by a man. Davi's paternal grandmother was one such woman. She already had two sons, and died on the journey while giving birth to a third. The boys disembarked the boat and the baby was given to a family who raised cattle. The details of how these arrangements were made, were not known or given by the women we interviewed, yet demonstrate the complicated kin-like bonds of the *jahaji bhai/bhein* (shipmate) relationship and other fictive kin ties that formed among indentured migrants. It is in this same vein that care for community continues to be part of village organising.

Tanty Shugars and Davi were like cousins and lived their whole lives in proximity to each other. As Davi said what she remembered of her family and lineage, Tanty Shugars would jump in to correct little details Davi may have gotten wrong. For instance when Davi said her father was the channa man, meaning he sold chickpeas (*channa*), Tanty Shugars corrected that it was only after he retired from working on

roads that he sold channa. Davi said, "What happen is, we grow up here together, so they might know half of my story." The women went on to give us a social history of the village, who else came from where and married into or out of their village. Davi didn't remember the names or faces of the many who Tanty Shugars remembered (she was just a few years older). Davi scolded her, "Listen to me, my story. When I dey in the house and Moya them tell me 'wash the wares', 'full the water', 'sweep the yard', me eh watching who is Murgi[6] and who is who. (laughs) They eh talking to you, why you watching?" Tanty Shugars chimed in, "and you does can't sit down there. They does say, "*Beti*[7] go and do some work, see the kitchen, help mama and them sweep out the house and thing." They were raised to be diligent daughters, as Davi said, "well she aunt and them mind she (Shugars), and my moya mind me," yet they spent their lives only several houses apart, and could sit with us, both in their seventies, to talk about their lives and their village. For Davi and Tanty Shugars, being raised by people other than their parents may have fostered within the women an ethic of care that extended beyond the nuclear family unit, beyond the idea of kin being blood relations, and beyond the household. Tanty Shugars and Davi grew up in a time when the village represented this mixture of people, some born in different worlds, many without biological families of their own, who have created a home space in Trinidad. Tanty Shugars recalled, "we used to live rell nice here long time. Everybody was united together. Indian, Negro, Chinese, Portuguese, whatever. Now have racialism[8], then didn't have that. Everybody together." Holding on to this memory of the village of her youth, Tanty Shugars felt the puja was a way for people to come together, even non-Hindus. "Like for Christmas, everyone would go house to house and eat a little or drink a little, even if it's half glass of water self". She saw the puja as another forum for togetherness while contributing to the welfare of the village.

Learning to worship

In this section, we look at how the tradition of pachrāt singing made its way to St Mary's village, and how it has been passed on for generations. The women who started holding annual communal Kanya-Kumarie pujas in the 1950s were Davi's and Tanty Shugars' foremothers. Sookrajie Dwarika was Davi's Moya, Sookanie Ramesar, Mongri Harboon, and Lukshmin Ragoonanan were Tanty Shugars' aunt, great grandmother and mother respectively. They were the students of Bhaktu Jaggoo and taught the songs to others in the village. Having learned the songs as young girls, Davi and Deokie translated the songs from Bhojpuri to Trinidadian English and told us of how the practice began. The following is an excerpt from the interview with the group of women where they trace the origins of Kanya-Kumarie puja in the village.

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[6] Just someone Tanty Shugars mentioned.
[7] Hindi for 'daughter'
[8] She means 'racism' and discrimination.

DB: It's my godfather[9] who start it.

TS: Ramjit Pundit

DB: He come and tell the old lady them he want to see them so and so date for a meeting by she grandmother (points to TS).

TS: Great-grandmother

DB: Everybody come down in the trace and he say, they want to raise a Durga puja but they have to go round the village and come back, and when they come back, they will do the puja. It have other people join in, but these were the people who raised the first puja[10].

KG: and how old were you when this happened?

TS: little girls still living in we mother house. (Both DB and TS were in their 70s)

After a bit, Davi added the following:

DB: Excuse me, I forget a lil thing. The puja didn't start until my godfather didn't arrange it with all the ladies who used to call him[11]. He called them, "I want to tell allyuh something important". He called them and tell them, "Next month is the Nav Raatri and I want allyuh to be clean[12] and do a walk from here to Harris village

GB: yea it was so far they used to go

TS: He tell them all whey[13] they could go

DB continued: "and then do a Devi puja, and if allyuh able every year, we go try to do it.

GB: It's the ladies who continue it.

TS: One lady will have the lota, she will lead the group. She come like the Bhawani[14].

Davi was this personification of Bhavani at the *mangey bheek* ceremony we attended, and had been for many years prior. "Like the day you going to mangey the bheek, the day you begging then, you bathe and go by you *jhandi* (prayer flags) with your *dhār* (offering of water and other sacred ingredients) and then you sing, this is the first song that you sing, calling upon she, that she help this one, she help

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[9] The Christianised term 'Godfather' is used to refer to the Guru or spiritual teacher with whom a person is initiated into the practice of Hinduism, often called a Christening.

[10] "Everyone came down in the street and he shared that he wanted to have a durga puja, but it would involve them making a procession around the village before the puja. Others later joined, but these people were the first to support the puja."

[11] "Excuse me, I forgot a small detail. The puja only started after my Guru had made arrangements with the women of the village for whom he had already performed pujas."

[12] "Be clean" means to fast from 'contaminating' things like non-vegetarian food, alcohol and the idle mind.

[13] Whey = where

[14] "Bhavani" translates to "giver of life", symbolised by the woman who leads the procession.

that one, come and help me too," Davi narrated during our interview (2014). She translated the first few lines of "Sumiro Maiya Aadi-Bhavani", "we call on you, first-Devi." In each verse, a word is changed to identify another group of people who are calling out to the Devi, "listen to our cry". The lyrics are as follows:

> *Sumiro Maiya aadi bhavani mahadey maiya, sumiro maiya aadi bhavani,*
> *Jake suire dukha paapa katita bhailay,*
> *Langara[15] pukare gharide pahadia maiyaa, sumiro maiya…*
> *Bahira[16] pukare gharide pahadia maiyaa, sumiro maiya…*
> *Andhara[17] pukare gharide pahadia maiyaa, sumiro maiya…*
> *Bhajan[18]i pukare gharide pahadia maiyaa, sumiro maiya…*

Tanty Shugars adds, "when you leaving the district to go out on the road, you call on she to provide protection on the road, so you have no hurt, no danger. Carry them safe, bring them back safe, in your name, we trust. We have faith in you, with love and devotion and we want you Mother to stand with we, and help we, and let we have victory over whatever we do." Davi continues, "that Devi she talking about, Aadi-Devi, the first Devi, she don't beat the drum, she does be travelling around with the chac-chac (rattles)." The song, Sumiro Maiya, captured why they did this puja and what it meant for them – the mother removed all illnesses, all troubles, brought wealth, health, happiness and good luck to the village. "You praising she," Tanty Shugars said, "not only for yourself, you know?! For everybody!" The women of St Mary's village see the puja as a sacrifice for the entire community and take pride in this role as protectors and nurturers of the community.

In a Hindu family, an important role of the mother is the guidance of religious practices within the home (Hosein 2011). The children attending and participating in the Kanya-Kumarie puja were usually accompanied by their mothers or grandmothers. A number of scholars including Desai and Goodall's study (1995) of Hindu women in Durban, South Africa and Freed and Freed's (1962) study of Durga Ashtami and Sili Sat ceremonies in Delhi, India, outline women's socialisation to Hindu rituals through practice, rather than theory, and mainly through their mothers. The women's knowledge is not scriptural, based in text and literacy, but in their experiences of performing ritual. The ritual of the panchayati puja, similar to that of the pujas discussed by Freed and Freed (1962), is derived from the dominant religious discourse, but as each generation continues it, learning from each other, the practice can develop localised traits, taking on features of both dominant religion and local traditions. The pachrāt songs are an example of this localised practice, as these songs were not widely sung in Trinidad.

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[15] People without limbs, the lame and the lepers
[16] The deaf
[17] The blind
[18] The barren

"My mother that mind me," said Davi, "my Moya, when she used to practice these song before the Devi time come, she used to practice it that she eh make mistake, and she used to tell me come and siddown and when she say 'this line mean so and so, this line mean so and so', and she and all used to cry when she was saying it."[19] Tanty Shugars also learned from Moya, "you mother used to tell me the meaning, how good it is to sing the songs and do the puja. I can't remember now. While we siddown doing work, she tell me like a story." Indra had been born and raised in the same village, living with her father and grandparents. "When I was younger, I used to come to keep company…" she said. "And that time, I didn't have anybody, and I used to come here and spend time with them," referring to Davi and Tanty Shugars. "They was with me before my father died, and I build a family with them. And is so I learn bhajans and I learn prayers and all of that." Davi herself taught the pachrāt songs to young women in the village like Indra, who were not her children. The women provided each other with spiritual guidance and knowledge transfer, where mothers and mother figures perform care and mentorship between generations of women regardless of actual kin ties (Mahabir-Persad 2014).

Many critics cite motherhood as an integral site for the oppression of women through its having been male-defined and controlled (O'Reilly 2004), and have shifted attention from a study of motherhood, to the act of mothering itself "[which] refers to women's experiences of mothering that are female-defined and centred, and potentially empowering to women" (O'Reilly 2004:2). In Natasha Mahabir-Persad's research, first-time Indo-Trinidadian mothers felt empowered by being able to participate in mothering rituals like caring for the baby, and in religious rituals pertaining to motherhood (like the *barahi* and *chhatti* ceremonies) (Mahabir-Persad 2014). Shaheeda Hosein (2011) studies the domestic lives of rural Indo-Trinidadian women in the first forty years of the twentieth century. She considers women's ability to reproduce as their source of matriarchal power. She states that the presence of children within the family was regarded with great joy and their birth was greeted with much celebration. Childbirth also raised the woman's status in the household from 'bride' to 'mother'. Motherhood and mothering, even of children one has not birthed, convey social power within the family and community.

Indra sought to fulfil the expectations of girls of the village to grow into wives and mothers. For many years after getting married, Indra struggled with keeping a pregnancy. The same pundit who performed their Kumari puja instructed her to fast for twenty-six consecutive Sundays and offer prayers to Krishna, to remove the sins from her past life. "I was cursed by God because in my life before I used to throw away children (abortions) and that's why I not having any in this life. And when I do get pregnant, they dying." She had been married for seven years and was yet to become a mother. "My heart and soul and everything I pour out into it. Everything

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[19] "My mother who raised me used to practice the songs before it was time for the puja so that she wouldn't make mistakes; she used to ask me to sit with her, and share the meaning of each line, crying as she said it."

he say, I believe and I just went through it step by step." She continued to fast even after the twenty-six weeks, and was soon pregnant. She fasted and prayed until the safe delivery of her baby girl. "It had a song I learn from Tara[20], and I take up the sweet rice and I feed him [Lord Krishna] and I offer it in the fire. And I had the baby; if you see she, she so strong." While the remedy for Indra was worship to Krishna, her performing the puja and becoming a mother were both paths for her to feel empowered. For Indra her ability to reproduce turned into the origin of her empowerment. Now her daughter is worshipped as one of the kumarie Devis for the puja.

Bhakti aur Shakti: Love and Power

Love is a key element in the relationship between Deity and devotee. Another song sung during the mangey bheek ritual is called "Lawanga". Its lines are repeated and the rhythm of the song is constant, like the formulae for other pachrāt songs. "Lawanga" tells the story of an exchange between the devotee and the Goddess, as Davi Boodram translates:

> *Lawanga harawa le me ayi bahania maliya, lawanga bhavani aawe milania dania.* – "The mother telling them to bring the lawang and the flowers. *Lao* is the Hindi name for clove, and to go with the tune, they say lawanga[21]. So the Devi telling them to bring the *lao* and the *haar*, the flower mala."

> *Koun phool phool maiya sanj re sawara, Jowne phool phool adhiraatrey maliniya dheriya* – "And the person who have to bring the flowers asking her which flowers she want, they bring the one from the morning or the one from the evening. So the mother say, she want the one that flowers midnight, that's the one to bring."

> *Sab phool phool maiya sanj re sakaraway, Arahool phool adhiraatrey maliniya dheriya* – "So now she telling back the mother, all the flowers does flower[22] in the morning or in the evening, only the *arahu* (hibiscus) does flower in the midnight."

> *Paye harwa maiya bahut mangana bhaile. Jowne mangana tuma mangore maliniya dheriya, Towne maangana hamadebo* – "When she get the flowers and she feel happy and say 'ask me for anything you want', so she say, the Devi say, 'I will give you, so go ahead'. I can't say it." [she pauses, wiping the tears from her eyes with the back of her hands].

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[20] Gaytree's 'home' name, a middle name or informal name.
[21] *Lawanga* is actually the word for clove. *Lao* means 'bring'.
[22] Meaning 'bloom'

Doodhawa se pota maiya tohare diha lahuwe, maliya amar kare dewore maliniya dheriya, Lawanga harwa gachi dewo – "She say 'by the grace of you, I have everything. Let my husband get everlasting life'."

When singing the pachrāt songs, Davi proclaims, "That's why they say it is emotional. When you understand deep down what the song mean, you can't even say it." Translating the songs for us evoked the same emotions felt when she performed the puja and sang with the other women of the village. It brought back memories of her mother and her own learning of the songs. Apart from this, the experience of communal worship to the Goddess was also an emotional spiritual journey. This deeply emotional response is sometimes referred to as "raising one's *Shakti*", "getting shakti" or "ketching power", although these terms typically evoke images of the sometimes violent and chaotic bodily reactions of those involved in ecstatic worship, like Kali puja (McNeal 2012).

"You could sing the song while you do your work, and when you siddown relaxing, you go see she go play the Devi for you. When you see she come and get the shakti; they say the shakti in your heart is the better one to get. Everybody have the shakti eh, but it have people who does get it and play the fool. You see God not helping them the same way. And then you see some of them siddown and the tears coming down they face, it's from they heart. And you see them like this, they hand trembling..." said Tanty Shugars, describing how Moya (her aunt and Davi's adopted mother) would experience the Shakti.

Those who "play the fool" are those who act out, cursing and yelling, dancing, thrashing, spinning or being exuberant in other ways. Tanty Shugars believed pure Shakti moved you in your heart and not through the "unorthodox rituals of spirit possession and fire walking" (Bahadur 2014:177) associated with the worship of Kali, the "dark aspect" of Durga, the Mother Goddess. Mc Neal (2012) and Erndl (2007) describe the manifestations of the Devi, where the Shakti or power of the Goddess takes control of the body of one devotee. She then interacts with others in the congregation, healing, talking, or dancing with them. She is sometimes violent. These possessions or manifestations of Shakti are characterised by demonstrations of power, whether psychic or physical power, and are met with scepticism by other Hindu practitioners who may fear this inexplicable aspect of Kali worship. There is doubt as to whether ecstatic practices can really be attributed to divine energy taking control of one's bodies or whether devotees are mimicking what they have witnessed being performed as Shakti possession.

The quiet and private act of experiencing Shakti is thought to be the result of love. Purity of consciousness and love is believed to facilitate experiencing this divine energy. Single-pointed devotion, or focusing the mind on that single entity, the subject and recipient of one's adoration, inspires physical bodily reactions. One's hairs stand on end, their fingers or lips tremble and their eyes fill with tears. One is

able to achieve this focus of mind by blocking out external influence by concentrating on the divine while simultaneously allowing oneself to experience the fullness of one's emotions, the yearning, the pain, the struggle, and the desire for something that will bring fulfilment. For many believers, feeling one's body be overcome by an energy they can't control, is a sure sign of the connection between them and the divine. The feeling itself can be a reason to seek out this closeness, and to be open to various paths that may take one there.

"Ham ke nagaria": Community Building in the Village

"The Devi-Ma come dey, and she dey with she red sari. How I must address the mother now. She stand up here, and now she want these things. We have to get the ghee and the milk," Davi explained. The song "Ham ke nagaria" (Our city/village) is sung at the end of the maangey bheek ceremony, when the women have returned to the house from where they began. The following is based on Davi's translation:

> *Ham ke nagaria ghoomare ye bhavani maiya, laali dwaja paharawe he bhavani maiya* –We went around our village and I get all these things for you, Mother. In your red clothes, you've come to accept it, Bhavani.
> *Apni tuliye maiya ghee yena se doodhawa, laali dwaja paharawe he bhavani maiya...* –For you we have gotten the ghee and milk. (chorus lines are repeated)
> *Apni tuliye maiya chandana tikuliya* – For you we have gotten the sandalwood paste to offer as Tilak/on the forehead
> *Apni tuliye maiya harawa se phoolawa* – For you we have gotten garlands of flowers
> *Apni tuliye maiya Sarii se pyerii* – For you we have gotten clothing made of yellow cotton
> *Apni tuliye maiya Khaira supariya* – For you we have gotten nutmeg and betel nut
> "Allyuh went fuss[23], around the village and come back safe, and you thanking she, and that is whey she want the things now. She carry you round the village, now you have to thank she." explained Tatny Shugars. "After you done gone on the road and come back, you sing this song to thank the Devi mai for bringing you back without accident. She go round the village, she tired now. You have to feed she and let she rest.

The Devi is personified, given these human traits of hunger and fatigue. Their material offerings are for her appeasement. These are common features of Devi worship in South Asia and the Diaspora (Freed and Freed 1962, Chandola 1977, Dalmiya 2000, Jenett 2005). Jenett (2005) describes the communal participation in the Pongala festival in Kerala, referring to the divine-human reciprocity that fuels

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[23] Slang for 'first'

sharing and caring for each other during the festival. Some women would cook and feed all the women who were participating in the festival, seeing it as their duty, but also symbolic of feeding the deity herself. One of Jenett's interviewees said, "Women ask Devi for something, Devi gives it to them, then women give Pongala to her, 'feed' her. Devi gets stronger, more powerful, so she can give those in the community who helped us even more blessings" (Jenett 2005:54). Everyone who participates or contributes to the goddesses' festival is blessed. The same belief is held of the panchayati puja; all of one's wishes will be fulfilled if they participate in the proceedings in any way, with a heart of love and selflessness. Like other communally performed pujas and yagnas, offerings made to the goddess as Kanya-Kumarie seeking blessings, husbands for unmarried women, children for barren and childless couples, relief and prevention of illness, success in business and other endeavours It is also essential in the "collective happiness" (Patel 1994) of the village. Ritual, is thus integral in constructing the relationships villagers have amongst themselves and to their deities.

According to Tracy Pintchman, ritual is constructive; "religious practice, which certainly entails a stylised repetition of acts executed in a ritual arena, is, in this regard, clearly an engendering process" (2007:5). Through the performance of ritual, the devotee and the deity are co-constructed in relation to each other. For instance, regarding the God is pure, necessitates the devotee make themselves pure before addressing the deity. Performing ritual according to prescribed instruction entails following the guidelines for maintaining purity, including abstinence from polluting substances and acts, like consuming meat, drugs or alcohol, or having sex; using clean and honestly acquired substances in the ritual; and performing penance as a way to focus the mind on the divine. Ritual purity and the stigma associated with menstruation has been used as a strategy for keeping women away from religious texts; their blood made them impure and so they could not handle religious texts for fear of conveying their pollution (Apte 1988). The Brahmin is pure, however, and untarnished by that which is polluting to other castes. Thus, fraternities of Brahmin boys and men were learned in Sanskrit and other ancient arts and sciences, while women are not literate or exposed to that education in the same way. The pundit recites Sanskrit mantras, studied by the elite Brahmin caste, while the women sing songs in Hindi and Bhojpuri, the colloquial languages. Yet, through the melding of mainstream and folk practices, the Brahmin-composed rituals of Kanya-Kumarie puja with the regional Bhojpuri pachrāt folk songs, the women demonstrate their negotiations with power and religious discourse.

Although the women are not consciously seeking a path away from the orthodox practice, their social organisation around the event, and their singing of folk songs are all small acts of resistance. Empowerment means possessing power and agency, believing that one can change their circumstances in life. Even if the women did not create the ritual space, they have taken to adapting it to suit their own needs and desires. They have made the space their own and certainly feel empowered by their

practice to influence not only their lives, but the lives of everyone in the village. Performing the puja for the benefit of the entire village, expands the women's sphere of influence and gives them feelings of importance. They feel valued by contributing to the village's material and spiritual wealth. For the women of St Mary's Village the panchayati puja is a powerful way of connecting to the Devi through a sisterhood that blesses the community. Instead of sitting by idly and watch the events unfolding in their homes and communities, the women made a concerted effort to seek out the Goddess's influence in their lives.

The women's presence in the spiritual arena influenced their lives outside the ritual context in ways that infuse religious beliefs into everyday experiences. For example, their projection of this mothering labour onto the village reflects their reaching out spatially, from the confines of the home to claim other spaces of belonging and power. In the post-indenture period when the South Asian community was still being established, the descendants of indentured workers were seeking to construct their own identities in this new Caribbean context. Nationalist movements in the region (mainly between 1930s and 1960s) further necessitated these identity negotiations, especially as racial and ethnic differences were being used to divide the large proletariat. The village provided the context or arena wherein this politics of belonging could be negotiated.

The women of St Mary's village saw song and worship as a path to empowerment, to see the impact of their actions on the welfare of the community. They claimed the village space as their own. But as the elderly women are passing on, these song traditions and the communalism in the village may be as well. There is not enough intergenerational transmission of these practices and the ideologies behind it. Possibly seen as traditionalism and archaic in its attention to the collective rather than the individual, the younger generation of girls and women in the village are not learning the songs or committing to participate in the puja in upcoming years. Some women cited time, saying their jobs do not permit them to commit to continuing the puja. Their pursuit of higher education and better paying employment also contribute to them spending less time in the villages. The kin ties among jahajis that fostered communalism are not present in younger generations, and individual fulfilment is eroding the commitment to village wellbeing that existed among indentured and post-indentured Indians who had to cooperate for their own survival. The adage, "it takes a village to raise a child" may be true, but in this herstory[24] we see that the village is made of individuals like Ramu, Sookrajie, Davi and Deokie who choose to participate in community care and building. As younger generations see the traditions of past generations as inadequate or useless for competing in the rapidly changing contemporary world, they are less likely to keep these traditions alive.

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[24] Feminist re-recording of past events to reflect women's experiences and perspectives

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Muscular Mahabharatas: Masculinity and Transnational Hindu Identity

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"Hence it is called Bharata. And because of its grave import, as also of the Bharatas being its topic, it is called Mahabharata. He who is versed in interpretations of this great treatise, becomes cleansed of every sin. Such a man lives in righteousness, wealth, and pleasure, and attains to Emancipation."
 - *Mahābhārata* (18.5) translation by K. M. Ganguli

Abstract

The climax of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* is undeniably muscular, since it involves a kṣatriya family fighting a brutal but righteous war. Many 21st century Mahabharata adaptations not only emphasize the muscularity of the epic, but also flex these muscles in an arena beyond the Kurukṣetra battlefield: the world. Through an analysis of texts such as Chindu Sreedharan's *Epic Retold* (2015) and Prem Panicker's *Bhimsen* (2009), I suggest that the increased visibility of epic warrior narratives across global platforms indicates a desire to re-fashion a hypermasculine identity for Hindus in the transnational religio-political sphere. I see this as an attempt to distance Hinduism from Gandhi's 'passive resistance' and colonial conceptions of the 'effeminate native'. Instead, it aligns with the nationalist and global aims of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who emphasizes the importance of Hindu traditions and physical fitness for collective prosperity. While these new epic adaptations certainly broaden the reach of Hindu culture beyond national boundaries, I suggest exhuming only warrior narratives from the epic texts oversimplifies Hindu values and threatens a range of gender identities and religious affiliations.

Keywords: Epic, Sanskrit, Gender, Transnational, Mahabharata

Introduction: The Epic's Eternal Life

The impact of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*[1] on the Indian literary imagination is inescapable. The epigraph suggests that the epic itself invites active re-readings, suggesting that those who engage in such a re-readings will be cleansed of sin and attain emancipation. The epic has been re-visited in a variety of Indian languages in oral and written form. However, as James Hegarty has noted, the *Mahābhārata* is a Sanskrit text that is ironically rarely read in Sanskrit, since few contemporary Hindus know the language itself. Therefore, many Hindus think of the epic as a story rather than a text (2011: 1). A.K. Ramanujan also writes that iterations[2] of the epic story do not always align with the Sanskrit text:

> The tradition itself distinguishes between the…story…and texts composed by a specific person… This traditional distinction between *katha* (story) and *kavya* (poem) parallels…the English one between story and discourse (1987: 25).

Authors have re-visited the story of the epic for centuries. In this essay, I argue that recent writers often move further away from both the story and text, maintaining tenuous links to the ideas and characters in the epic while adapting it in form and content to converse with contemporary contexts. In texts such as Chindu Sreedharan's *Epic Retold* (2015) and Prem Panicker's *Bhimsen* (2009), authors depart from the epic to seek directions for the future through explorations and alterations of the epic past.

From second-century Sanskrit playwright Bhāsa's dramas *Dūtavākyam* and *Urubhangam*[3] to modern adaptations such as Sreedharan and Panicker's, every crop

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[1] Many modern epic adaptation authors and scholars do not use the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration. When discussing or quoting their works, I have deferred to the authors' spellings. Hindi words have been phonetically transliterated and italicized without diacritics. When *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* are italicized with diacritics, I am referring to specific pre-modern Sanskrit texts attributed to Vālmīki and Vyāsa respectively. When citing the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* text, I have used the abbreviation MBh. When Mahabharata and Ramayana not in italics or marked with diacritics, I am gesturing to the broader epic traditions which include their many oral, written, and media versions.

[2] Since epic stories have appeared so frequently, Ramanujan uses the word "telling" for iterations of the epic texts to rightly destabilize the notion of the Sanskrit texts as *ur*-texts (ibid. 25). However, the premodern texts he discusses transmit the story and privilege its own universe. In the case of newer works in novel and transmedia in this essay, the authors use the epics as a point of departure, rupturing what is commonly believed within the epic universe to examine worlds outside of it. For this reason, I prefer the term "adaptation" to describe these texts, since these narratives are purposefully adapted and altered by authors to suit new contexts.

[3] Urubhangam, which literally means the shattering of the thigh, depicts conflicts of male sexual prowess. It draws from an epic incident where Duryodhana invites Draupadī to sit on his thigh after she is sexually assaulted in an open court. In retaliation, her husband Bhimā vows to break his thigh in battle (MBh 2.27).

of epic adaptations has the potential to strengthen Hinduism. Arti Dhand argues that Hindus rarely re-visit the epics to be surprised. Instead, they hope for a greater immersion in the story and by extension, Hinduism:

> It is of crucial significance that in hearing these tales, Hindus are being taught not about disconnected fictional heroes, but about themselves; both the epics, but particularly the Mahabharata, are rehearsals of Hindu identity. The epics then are fundamentally tools for the creative reflection, crafting, refinement, and ultimate public political assertion of Hindu identity (2008: 257-258).

Epics and their adaptations, are part of an endless chain of memories that bind collective identities and shape beliefs.

However, such a collectivity often privileges a specifically Hindu Brahmin and upper class worldview. Further, many of the literary adaptations are now in English, which assume a cultural centrality and put forth an elitism. The politics of English in India are intimately connected to the strengthening of Hinduism, class, and nationalism. Srinivas Aravamudan writes, "The circulation of Hinduism through English…continues to be an important vehicle for the religious discourse of middle-class urban Hindus in search of their 'subjective truths'" (2006: 9). English language epic adaptations recall and re-generate distinctly Hindu worlds for readers—whether they are Hindu Indians in the subcontinent or writers of the Indian diaspora in search of homeland-related nostalgia. In a globalized world, the English language becomes "sometimes vehicle and at other times the fabricator [for the] transnational mediation of supposedly traditional practices and doctrines" (ibid. 29). Further, Hindu culture or what is thought to be also exhibits mobility with or without the common vehicle of the English language. This too contributes to a transnational mediation of identity, gender, and culture. Frequently, the objects of the discourse are the stories of the epic, which now have the potential to travel all over the world on the wings of new media and capitalism.

Owing to their increased visibility, epic adaptations also have the potential to be more influential than the Sanskrit text in South Asia and the South Asian diaspora. Therefore, contemporary writers who engage and proliferate new versions of epic stories are often able to reinvigorate Hinduism and channel its ideas towards contemporary ends. In this essay, I discuss a few such writers who adapt the Mahabharata, not merely for spiritual emancipation the text promises, but also for directives that would serve the interests of new global Hindu audiences. I suggest that for writers such as Sreedharan and Panicker, the Mahabharata tradition

provides ideological blueprints for a distinctly Hindu masculinity, owing to which one may emerge victorious in the global arena beyond the kurukṣetra[4] battlefield.

The interest in warrior masculinity suggests not just an investment in developing cultural capital for the world stage, but also a calculated intermingling of hegemonic Hindu culture with economic capital. The impulse to re-fashion Hindu identity for the 21st century follows the parallel rise of Hindu nationalism and post-liberalization[5] economics in India in the 1980s and 1990s. Purnima Mankekar (1999) and Arvind Rajagopal (2001) have written that the rise of mass media, especially television, helped consolidate and re-shape Hindu identity in India. Between 1987 and 1990, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata were adapted as long-running serials on the national television network Doordarshan, which translates to gazing (*darshan*) from afar (*door*). Mankekar notes the meaning of "*darshan*" within Hindu ideals "involves both seeing and being beheld by the deity". She writes that this had a special significance for the viewers of the epic television shows:

> The viewers…engaged the Ramayan with the same reverence they would have accorded a religious ritual: seeing Lord Rama on television became a form of darshan for them… For them, there was little difference between reading the Ramayana and watching it on TV (1999: 200).

This process also allowed millions of viewers to collectively experience what was marketed to be a singular and definitive Hindu religio-national culture. As economic liberalization brought in foreign trade and investments, Hindus were primed to engage with new products and capital from a position of cultural strength. Rajagopal notes that re-imagining the epics via television was empowering for viewers, who were able to:

> [C]onsume not only the product but the act of consumption itself… [but also] re-stage it in imagination, and perceive themselves as part of a grander design, proof of a larger intelligence at work than merely their own (2001: 95).

The television adaptations strengthened the Hindu national imaginary while also focusing anew on the epics as authentic sources of Hindu culture. Since then, many writers and politicians continue to re-deploy the epic texts not only to put forth who

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[4] The Great War in the epic was believed to be fought on this battlefield, which is situated in modern-day Haryana. The word translates to the area of the Kurus who are the common ancestors of the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas, the protagonists and the antagonists of the epic respectively.

[5] The Indian economic liberalization was initiated in 1991 under the aegis of the P.V. Narsimha Rao of the Congress Party. The Congress abandoned their socialist agenda for the first time to embrace liberalization. In 1996, the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) gained power as a part of a coalition. The coalition lasted only 13 days and the BJP Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee resigned. BJP came back to power in 2014, by which time it would cash into the consequences of liberalization to fuel their Hindu nationalist agenda.

they are, but also who they wish to be economically and politically within India and the world at large.

Gendered Politics

Before following the epic's path beyond increasingly porous national boundaries, it is necessary to consider a history of gendered politics within the nation. The adaptations of the epic provide occasions to see the peculiar twists and turns the formulation of Hindu identity has taken in the last century. Recent Mahabharata adaptations emphasize the masculine nature of these post-nationalist endeavors, reflecting the rise of the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) and its assertion of a singular hegemonic masculinity that is focused both on the male body and nation building. Such a move is also a pushback against previous iterations of Indian masculinities from the late colonial period to the middle of the twentieth century.

During the colonial period, scholars were ambivalent towards Indian texts and cultures. For instance, translator William Jones appreciated Sanskrit texts but translated them with some reservations, editing passages that he considered hypersexual and inappropriate for European readers (Sugirtharajah 2003: 14). Historian James Mill, on the other hand, disagreed with Jones' largely favorable view of Hinduism and denounced the epics as "more extravagant, and unnatural, less correspondent with the physical and moral laws of the universe…less ingenious…monstrous…" (1826: 46-47). He considered the style and content of Sanskrit literature as evidence of the weakness and depravity of Hindus. Broadly, the British posited Hindu culture inferior to Christianity and claimed that Indian men were effete. They argued therefore, that Indians were incapable of self-rule and democracy. Mark Singleton writes about Muscular Christianity in Britain in the mid-nineteenth century, where the cultivation of the body was considered necessary for political autonomy. He notes,

> The body, with its cultivated capacity for moral engagement in the world, housed a somatic imperative for all who belonged to nation, religion, and empire and was negatively defined in contrast to those races and lands that did not share this common ideology of purpose (2010: 88-33).

The difference in perceived masculine bodily strength was thus used to systemically disempower and denigrate Indians. Singleton also shows how these ideas influenced early Indian nationalists, who attempted to contest European muscularity and their own perceived effeminacy by developing a physically vigorous culture of their own (ibid. : 96). In doing so, they hoped to reclaim their masculinity and stake a claim to sovereignty by melding together physical fitness, politics, and the idea of longstanding Hindu traditions.

However, after India gained Independence, the ideologies of influential figures like Gandhi and Nehru diverged from these models of muscular and militaristic manhood. M.K. Gandhi, for instance, viewed military training as necessary, but also valued passive non-violence, thoughtfulness, and compassion (Valiani 2014). Gandhi re-framed passivity as strength while adopting a celibate and ascetic lifestyle later in his life. Joseph Alter explains, "Gandhi affected the persona of a world-renouncer…[and] was able to mix political, religious and moral power, thus translating personal self-control into radical social criticism and nationalist goals" (2012: 21). In contrast to Gandhi, who retired from family life, the first Prime Minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru was celebrated for being family oriented. He was seen as a nurturing father to his own daughter Indira Gandhi and known nation-wide as "*chacha*" (uncle) owing to his avuncular persona. Nehru's birthday, November 14, is still celebrated as "Children's Day" in India to recognize his kind-hearted support for young citizens. By the 1980s however, many Hindu right-wing politicians would see Nehru's sensitivity as a mark of impotence (Krishnamurti 2014). Perhaps the greatest blow that Indian manhood suffered was when his daughter Indira Gandhi claimed national leadership.

Unlike her gentlemanly father or her beatific namesake, Indira Gandhi was thought to be willful and uncontrollable owing to her quest for absolute power. Indira Gandhi is often critiqued in gendered terms and attempts to locate her within the parameters of Hindu femininity are marked with contradictions. Dagmar Hellman-Rajanayagam points out that Indira Gandhi was often taken less seriously because she was a woman and a mother. She was considered emotional and unreliable for loving her despotic son Sanjay to a dangerous extent (2008: 45). A widow ruling the country was also considered ominous (ibid.: 52) On the other hand, Atal Bihari Vajpayee of the BJP praised her for being powerful like Goddess Durga (ibid.: 40). Indira was also both ridiculed and lauded for being the only "man" in her all-male cabinet (ibid.: 56). Indira's rise to power under the aegis of the secular Congress party signified to many an emasculation of Hindu men and the emergence of an unstoppable, destructive femininity. At the climax of Indira's career was the National Emergency, which lasted for twenty-one months between 1975 and 1977.

Before the Emergency, Indira Gandhi's favorability was on the decline following several social, economic and political crises, including a case of election malpractice filed against her, and the rise of her son Sanjay as a dictatorial figure. To maintain power, she recommended to the President, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, that a State of Emergency be declared in the country, granting her rule of decree. During the Emergency, civil liberties were suspended, curfew was applied, and leaders of the opposition were arrested. Around this time, the Janata Party (People's Party) was formed largely to defeat Indira and her ideologies. The party was later renamed Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), emphasizing its ideological goals—*bharat* is often considered a Hindu space which is distinct from the secular, anglicized "India". The BJP rose to prominence over the next two decades with a new vision of India that

departed from Indira Gandhi and the Congress' secular and socialist ideals. The BJP and its supporters sought to construct a national identity with deeper engagements with Hindu culture or what it is imagined to be. Such an ideology was also distanced from Indira's purportedly toxic and unstable femininity by emphasizing the stable, disciplined, and potentially militant Hindu male bodies.

BJP's leaders did not always take a militant approach to promoting Hinduism. For instance, when Vajpayee was Prime Minister between 1998 and 2004, he was considered measured or reluctant rather than decisive and militaristic. He was appreciated for his poetic speeches but also, derided for his halting speaking style. BJP's decisive and masculine stance began to emerge when the Babri controversy peaked in the early 1990s. The Babri events emphasized the ties between the BJP and several explicitly Hindu nationalist organizations, most notably the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP). Both the BJP and VHP were offshoots of the paramilitary Hindu nationalist organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Several VHP, RSS, and BJP members believed that the site of the Babri Mosque, which was built during the reign of Mughal emperor Babar, was an aberration in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh. Instead, they wished for the site to be marked as the birthplace of Lord Rama of the Ramayana. Although a movement to demolish the mosque and erect a Rama temple in its place had been brewing for several decades, it gained the greatest momentum when BJP leader L.K. Advani embarked on a *rath yatra* (chariot journey) across several northern states in 1990.

Advani, who was more explicitly supportive of Hinduism than Vajpayee, made the highly publicized journey, which began in Somnath, Gujarat and ended in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh from September to October 1990. He traveled in a DCM-Toyota fashioned to look like a mythological chariot. Considering the iconography of Advani's vehicle, Richard Davis writes that the design of the "chariot" was specifically based on Arjuna's from the Doordarshan show *Mahabharat.* Although some well-heeled spectators dismissed the phenomenon as "Toyota Hinduism", the procession was largely greeted with devotional fervor and wild enthusiasm. Hindu activists and BJP, RSS, VHP members encouraged the crowds, singing religious songs while dressed as epic characters (Davis 1996: 28-29). While Advani himself was still considered benevolent and gentlemanly, the overall mood of the event emphasized the VHP's stance, which was "religious, allusive, militant, masculine, and anti-Muslim" (ibid.: 42). This chariot journey was similar to other Hindu religious festivals such as those held in Puri, Odisha[6], but more markedly political. It recalled the roaming of epic warriors who symbolically conquered new lands and engaged in lengthy battles for righteous causes. It encouraged popular participation in ethno-nationalist politics across class divides. It made visible the mythological origins of

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[6] An annual festival in Puri celebrates the god Jagannath, his brother Balachandra, and his sister Subhadra. The idols are taken for a procession back and forth from the Main Temple to the Gundicha Temple in richly decorated chariots.

Hinduism, vilified Muslim and secular 'Others' and engaged new technologies to go further geographically and ideologically than ever before.

The *rath yatra* was ultimately cut short when Advani was arrested in Bihar in October 1990 but its impact was felt keenly. Several other rallies also drummed up support for the issue, which culminated in a group of BJP, RSS, VHP activists tearing down the Babri Mosque on 6 December 1992. Wide-spread and devastating communal riots followed, damaging the reputation of the BJP and the other groups for the next decade. Although Vajpayee had a moderate and stable tenure under the aegis of BJP, the next two decades chiefly saw a number of non-BJP governments formed by the Congress, coalitions, and other parties. Following a long Congress rule with Manmohan Singh at the helm between 2004 and 2014, the BJP returned triumphantly to national power with the election of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014.

Modi, whose campaign extensively employed social media, remains an active internet citizen who regularly makes contact with his followers on Facebook and Twitter. Presenting himself as a man of the 21st century, Modi also takes up the baton from predecessors like Advani and runs with a more decisively masculine stance. Modi was actively involved in anti-Emergency protests in the 1970s and boasts early connections to the RSS. Today, he promotes an ideal of masculinity which is staunchly Hindu in being aware of its roots while also eager to establish a presence in the global economy. In a recent article, Sanjay Srivastava termed this ideology "Modi-masculinity". He writes,

> While borrowing from pre-national and nationalist ideas, Modi-masculinity's peculiar characteristic lies in its judicious presentation of Indian manhood as both deeply national (and hence territorialized) as well as global (and de-territorialized)… *Modi-masculinity* [emphasis added] stands at the crossroads of postnationalism and moral consumption and, in this, combines the continuing imperatives of longstanding power structures and relations of deference, with newer political economies of neoliberalism. That is to say, it combines the idea of an Indian essence with the notion of global comity. (2015: 336)

Modi embodies a deep confidence in his ability to lead and develop the nation based on this uniquely Hindu masculinity. In a 2014 rally in Gorakhphur, Uttar Pradesh (UP), he challenged opposing resident politician Mulayam Singh Yadav by saying that it would take a "56-inch chest" to make UP as developed as Gujarat (Srivastava and Bano 2014). Modi, who was the Chief Minister of Gujarat from 2001-2014, was drawing attention to his own role in modernizing the state and therefore, suggesting his readiness to lead the nation into global modernity. Since his election as Prime Minister, he frequently urges his followers to call him *Pradhan Sevak* (Prime Server) rather than the Hindi term for Prime Minister, *Pradhan Mantri.* The term *sevak*

assures the public of his working-class ethics and ability to get the job done while also hinting at his connections to the RSS. As scholars like Singleton (2010) and Alter (2012) have shown, the RSS also emphasized male physical fitness as necessary for political prosperity while promoting Hindu ideologies (Alter 2012: 233, Singleton 2010: 159). In keeping with this ideology, Modi also advocates for fitness, especially yoga[7] as a uniquely Indian way to attain the same.

Modi's image is notably devoid of both virility and fertility. A brief scandal before the 2014 election revealed that he had an estranged wife named Jashodaben. Modi and Jashodaben separated shortly after their families arranged their marriage when they were teenagers (Taylor 2014). Jashodaben, now a retired schoolteacher, maintains the Hindu customs of matrimony and lives in the small Gujarati town of Unjha. She has largely faded out of the news. On the other hand, Modi's seemingly celibate status has marked him as more focused and determined, which also invites comparisons with Gandhi. Both leaders hail from Gujarat and have deep, though different, engagements with Hinduism and sexual containment. Gandhi was celibate in his later life, which Alter writes helped him craft for his followers, "the logic of celibacy as a means to psychological security, self-improvement, and national reform" (2012: 21). Alter also explains that Gandhi's celibacy had deeper philosophical and religious roots in the Hindu concept of *brahmacarya* (priestly bachelorhood) where masculinity is strengthened by semen retention (ibid. 24). However, even though Gandhi was hailed the symbolic father of the nation, he had a difficult relationship with his biological children and wife. He also remains the subject of sexual scandals and intrigue. Modi, on the other hand, is able to build on Gandhi's legacy with more conviction and less controversy since he is unencumbered by familial responsibilities and sexual improprieties.

In the 21st century, Modi's celibate lifestyle also draws attention away from India's globally ridiculed fecundity. Instead, he spearheads a muscular Hinduism combined with technological savviness that allows him worldwide access. He conducts energetic dialogue with followers on Twitter and Facebook and also travels all over the world to meet prominent non-resident Indians. In doing so he proposes to serve Indians and represent the nation on a global scale because of his physical-political fitness. A current crop of Mahabharata adaptations and historical re-imaginings articulate a masculinity that reflects Modi's fit, Hindu, and global politics. They showcase a Hindu ideology removed from Gandhian passivity and non-violence, reflecting instead the aspirations of an economically liberalized and nuclear-armed India of the 21st century. In these texts, Hindu heroes are fit and militaristic but also sensitive. Like Modi, none of them are wantonly reproductive or barbarically

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[7] A recent article in the *New York Times* discussed how Modi's rise was supported by billionaire yoga guru, Baba Ramdev. Ramdev's followers believe that he changed India for the better by drawing it away from the west and redirecting it towards his own brand of yoga and Hindu tradition (Worth 2018).

colonizing other lands. Instead, they demonstrate their readiness to rule their own land while playing well with cultural others within and beyond it.

The Age of Bhima

The new wave of muscular Mahabharata adaptations clusters around the character of Bhīma. In the *Mahābhārata*, Bhīma is the second of the Pāṇḍava brothers who is fathered by the God of Wind (MBh 1.7). He grows up to be a warrior who kills numerous deadly enemies, especially to guard the honor of his wives Hidimbi and Draupadi (MBh 1.9; 4.24; 8.83). His exceptional skills in mace fighting lead him to defeat the Kaurava king Duryodhana, effectively ending the Great War (MBh 9.30-64). The new Bhīma-based texts, such as Sreedharan and Panicker's, depart from concerns raised in mid-to-late 20th century Mahābhārata adaptations. While many earlier texts also conceived of nation, gender, and culture as problems that could be worked through by re-examining epic situations, they focused on different characters such as Karṇa and Draupadī. Several adaptations, including Shivaji Sawant's Marathi novel *Mrityunjaya* (1967) and Kiran Nagarkar's play *Bedtime Story* (2015), re-imagine the life and death of Karṇa. In the Sanskrit text, Karṇa is born illegitimately to the mother of the Pandavas but adopted by a lower caste family and thus grows up not knowing his parentage (MhB 1.7). The Karṇa adaptations echo the Indian nation's colonial and postcolonial uncertainties about caste-related oppression.

Several earlier texts have also explicitly critiqued warrior masculinity and nationhood. For instance, Dharmveer Bharati's Hindi play *Andha Yug* (2005) suggests the war is dehumanizing and echoes the despair following the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. More critical adaptations also appeared after the Emergency, including Nagarkar's play and Shashi Tharoor's English book *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), both of which critique corrupt political entities. Later adaptations, like Pratibha Ray's Oriya novel *Yajnaseni* (1995) and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's English novel *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), emphasize the flawed humanity of female characters such as Draupadi and bring women's suffering to the fore to challenge the contemporary validity of Hindu traditions. In contrast, the 21st century muscular Mahabharata adaptations appear to have few doubts about the Hindu tradition and its ability to find strength beyond the nation. They present the epic heroes as virile super-humans who ponder great philosophical dilemmas while exhibiting tremendous capability to destroy their enemies. The character Bhīma embodies many of these muscular attributes and is therefore the focus of several recent adaptations.

Panicker and Sreedharan's Bhīma-oriented epic adaptations take Bhīma's heroism further, claiming an earlier work, M.T Vasudevan Nair's Malayalam novel *Randamoozham,* originally published in 1984, as their inspiration. Nair's work was

recently translated into English by Gita Krishnakutty and titled *Bhima: Lone Warrior* (2013). According to Krishnakutty's translation, Nair retells some events of the epic from Bhima's point of view. The title translates to "next in line", suggesting that Bhima is wrongly left behind in spite of his many qualities. While the text valorizes Bhima in a manner that is consistent with the Sanskrit epic, it subverts Bhima's oafishness by granting him intellect and potential for empathy. Bhima is a masculine but sensitive hero, who is devoted to his wife Draupadi. The romance remains an important subplot until Bhima ascends heavenwards with her and his brothers but stops when she falls. At this time, he realizes that he will not be ready for heaven until he finishes his work on earth by killing the remaining enemies of his family. He decisively returns alone to the forests to prove his worth before claiming immortality (2013: 357). His physical strength is the key to his success in the mortal and immortal world.

Bhima's masculine confidence has fresh appeal in the times of BJP's Hindu masculinist and globalist stance. Although Nair's text was published in Malayalam in the early 1980s, it has spawned several recent translations and adaptations, such as Krishnakutty's translation, an upcoming film, and texts by Sreedharan and Panicker. Journalist Prem Panicker, who spent several years overseas as editor of the publication *India Abroad,* made the first known attempt to loosely translate Nair's text into English in 2009. Panicker's text largely corresponds to Nair/Krishnakutty's presentation of Bhima, who is physically powerful but grounded in his humanity. The novel similarly ends with Bhima choosing the mortal world over the heavens, because he "still had work to do" (2009: 372). Like Modi and the BJP, Nair/Krishnakutty and Panicker's Bhimas believe themselves to be one of the common people and uniquely suited for the labor required for the development of their lands.

Panicker created a digitized version of Nair's text by presenting his translation episodically on his WordPress blog *Smoke Signals.* Each blog post provided one of the 72 episodes and invited the comments of readers and fellow bloggers. In 2009, he made a full version of the text, titled *Bhimsen,* available online. While it is not clear if Panicker actively worked suggestions from the blog comments into the text, the version was very popular. Even though the text was not published in the conventional print novel format, many online users have reviewed it as a "book" on websites such as *goodreads.com* and *thinkerviews.com*. In a review for the publication *Business Standard,* freelance writer and journalist Jai Arjun Singh praised the book for eschewing the supernatural background of the epic for an "earthy" realism. The essay was also shared on Singh's Blogspot site *Jabberwork*. Singh and Panicker appear to have interacted through the blogging world and their admiration is mutual: Panicker compliments Singh's blogpost on epic adaptations in the text of *Bhimsen* (2009: 2). Singh lauds Panicker's adaptation and suggests that constantly rewriting the epic can help destabilize the claims of the Hindu right, who are wedded to the idea of a stable Hindu past. However, every epic rewriting is also

an insistence on the importance of Hinduism and potentially, a reduction of its values to certain attributes, such as male muscularity. Further, this also shows that while the epic might have a global reach through new media, its prime movers are often a handful of elite men having a mutually congratulatory conversation among themselves.

A later diasporic English adaptation, Chindu Sreedharan's *Epic Retold* (2015), also participates in this conversation by tracing its lineage to Panicker and Nair. Sreedharan, a professor of journalism at Bournemouth University in the United Kingdom, also retells the epic from Bhima's perspective based on his readings of *Bhimsen* and *Randamoozham*. In the introduction, Sreedharan writes that he became interested in creating fiction for Twitter in 2009. At this time, he writes that was reading his former colleague Panicker's *Bhimsen* (2015: 2). Although he had read Nair's work as a child, it was Panicker's work that inspired him to re-create the epic for the new medium of Twitter. The author began to retell the epic as a series of tweets on Twitter over a period of four years, from 2010 until 2014. The tweets were popular and earned Sreedharan a book contract. While revising the tweets for a draft of *Epic Retold* in novel form, Sreedharan read the works of other adaptors such as Divakaruni and Tharoor. He found himself compelled anew by Nair's rendering and read it several times (ibid.: 5). It is noteworthy that Sreedharan's primary access to the epic was through other recent English and vernacular adaptations rather than the original in Sanskrit. That the author leans on relatively recent adaptations suggests that his work is an adaptation of other adaptations and many degrees removed from the Sanskrit epic text. As discussed earlier, Sreedharan is certainly not the first to adapt the epic story to suit his own ends. What is crucial in his case and that of other adaptations is not distance from the original, if one can even claim there is one[8], but how these adaptations shed light on emerging ideologies. The warrior adaptations, for instance, constantly reproduce the same ideas about Hindu hegemonic masculinity.

While the adaptation repeats familiar ideas, Sreedharan's use of the Twitter writing format is an innovative stylistic experiment. The text is divided into 40 episodes of approximately 50-100 tweets. Sreedharan constructs a Bhima who worries that he is slow-witted but recognizes his immense strength (2015:11). He revels in his muscularity, single-handedly killing various characters such as Hidimb, Keechak, and Dushasana (ibid. 47, 166, 253). Like its predecessors, the text also grants Bhima sensitivity and thoughtfulness that become evident through interiority. He attempts to understand the world around him, critiquing brothers and cousins at several

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[8] Many theorists, including David Shulman and James Hegarty, have pointed out that the Sanskrit epic is inherently unstable and endlessly dynamic. In fact, there have been several attempts to organize and annotate a stable textual version of the epic but few have been successful. The most successful version has been compiled by the Bhandarkar Oriental Institute in Pune, India. The last edition of the same was published in 1972. Nevertheless, scholars like Shulman are not convinced this helps consolidate a definitive singular text of the *Mahābhārata* (25).

junctures for their philosophical, personal, and militaristic follies. He is painstakingly shown to be the best of the Kuru cousins and a worthy hero.

Sreedharan also makes several anachronistic moves to assure the reader that both Bhima and the narrative are sentient of intra- and extra-textual political crises. Bhima is painstakingly depicted to be on the right side of contemporary Indian politics through his support for marginalized characters. Early in the text he marries the "tribal" Hidimbi. Although he exoticizes her "copper skin" and childlike ways, his gaze is merely benevolent (2015: 45-7). Comparatively, his older brother Yudhishtira is belligerent and hateful, accusing all "tribals" of being "the same…plunder[ing] and steal[ing] women when they can" (ibid. 133). Yudhishtira, who is a troubled but dharma-following king in the Sanskrit epic[9], is consistently shown here to act selfishly and have poor judgement. In contrast, Bhima is noble and sensitive. He is profoundly affected by concerns of female characters, such as when his aunt Gandhari discusses how little the men in the palace have cared about the "tears of the women" (ibid.: 23) Later, Bhima also furthers the cause of Shikhandi, a warrior who is born female but transitions to male to avenge his own honor (ibid.: 193; MBh 5.170-193). Bhima here is shown to think beyond his own needs as the champion of the oppressed. Although the text doesn't announce it explicitly, it is made increasingly clear that Bhima is a better man than his brothers and cousins.

At the end, Bhima's worthiness is taken up another notch when his mother Kunti subtly reveals that his uncle, King Dhristarashtra, fathered him (2015: 276). This is also a departure from Nair/Krishnakutty and later Panicker's versions, where Kunti reveals that Bhima is the son of a forest dweller whom Panicker further classifies as "tribal" (Nair and Krishnakutty 2013: 354; Panicker 2009: 361). Even though the endings of all of the books destabilize Bhima as a half-God, Sreedharan affirms his royalty while Nair/Krishnakutty and Panicker emphasize his common roots. Sreedharan's move also echoes the aforementioned Karṇa adaptations, where the new protagonist is purported to be a worthier ruler than the warring kings Duryodhana and Yudhiṣthira. However, unlike Karṇa who meets his end on the battlefield, *Epic Retold* ends with Bhima returning to the palace (MBh 8.67; 2015: 276). In doing so, the book leaves open the possibility that the mightiest one will claim his rightful place on the throne. Unlike Nair/Krishnakutty and Panicker's Bhimas who see their strength as an outcome of their earthiness, Sreedharan's Bhima is confident in his ability to inhabit the royal and political world specifically

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[9] Barbara Holdrege writes that *dharma* is a concept in Hinduism that is difficult to translate into a single English word. She says it can mean but is not limited to: "religion, law, duty, norm, social usage, right conduct, morality, justice or righteousness" (2004: 213). Yudhiṣthira struggles to adhere to *dharma* against all odds in the Sanskrit epic. Alfred Hiltebeitel sees him as a central character in the epic, writing that the text is an expression of his difficult moral and religious education (2001: 4).

because of his super-human strength. His hegemonic masculine persona confirms his political ability, echoing the sentiments of muscular Hindu politics.

Popular Muscle

Bhīma's legend continues to grow, fueled by international investments from diasporic Indians. Financed by Dubai-based billionaire B.R. Shetty, Nair's *Randamoozham* is currently being adapted into what is expected to be the most expensive Indian film ever (Suri 2017). CNN reported that the project has a budget of Rs. 1000 crore or $155 million. The film is slated to be released in two parts starting in 2020. The press release for the film, which was posted on Facebook in April 2017, emphasized the national and global reach of the project, claiming that it would draw together the best of the Indian film fraternity and western technologies. It notes that the film will be shot in English, Hindi, Kannada, Malayalam, Tamil and Telugu but also dubbed into "leading foreign languages". The release specifies the transnational scope of the production, claiming that "[the] film will have an identity across continents". The producer Shetty has an ambitious vision for the film. He says, "I believe that this film will not only set global benchmarks, but also reposition India and its prowess in mythological storytelling. I am confident that this film will be adapted in over 100 languages and reach over 3 billion people across the world" ("Mahabharata- Randaamoozham The Movie" 2018). His language indicates a desire to make a robust presence in the global market by emphasizing the spectacle of Indian mythology. Notably, there is no explicit reference to Hinduism in the post. Instead, it is uncritically advertised that this adaptation of the Mahābhārata is equipped to represent numerous and religiously varied Indian mythologies.

The film's budget and popularity is expected to eclipse the popular neo-epic *Baahubali*, which is more loosely influenced by Hindu mythology. Beginning in 2015 as a feature film, the *Baahubali* franchise has grown to include two feature films shot in Tamil, Telugu, and also dubbed in Hindi, an English literary fiction trilogy, an animated web series, a video game, and a graphic novel. *Baahubali*'s creators were inspired by the *Amar Chitra Katha* series, which presents Hindu stories and myths in comic book format to educate young readers. Literally named Undying Picture Tales, *Amar Chitra Katha* underscores that the knowledge of the epics and Hindu texts are forever relevant. Monographs such as Nandini Chandra's *The Classic Popular: Amar Chitra Katha* (2008) and Karline McLain's *India's Immortal Comic Books* (2009) have shown how Hindu-nationalist ideology was defined and promulgated by this extremely popular comic book series. S.S. Rajamouli, the creator of the film franchise, borrowed visual cues from the popular series to imagine the pre-modern world and its peoples (Mishra 2015). It appears then, that the Indian film fraternity is enhancing earlier iterations of Hindu mythology with superior graphics and cinematography. Although they may not explicitly advertise

Hindu-nationalism, they are certainly presenting the Hindu past as robust and relevant in the nation and the world.

Baahubali, which literally means "he who has strong arms", is representative of the spectacle of muscularity in contemporary Indian cinema. The film posters and promotional videos showcase brawny protagonists and antagonists with voluptuous heroines. The theme song of the film spells out the importance of masculine strength and its potential to change history, with Hindi lyrics such as "*uski bhujayein, badlein kathayein* (his arms alter stories)". The overblown machismo in *Baahubali* speaks not only to the epic setting but also to a larger trend in Indian cinema that celebrates the physical fitness of a new generation of male actors. The visual of muscularity is an assertion that new Indian man is now attractive according to global, hegemonic masculine standards. This trend began a decade after economic liberalization, when male protagonists of films such as *Kaho Naa...Pyaar Hai* (2000), *Lagaan* (2001), and *Ghajini* (2008) started becoming visibly muscular, often far more than their Hollywood counterparts. They followed a decade of sensitive and boyish diasporic heroes who announced their respect for Hindu patriarchal values, such as the character of Raj Malhotra in *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) (Banerjee 2017:100). By the early 2000s, the good Hindu boys retained their mischief, but their bodies began to suggest that they could fight in a war. Such bodies have the potential to allay Hindu nationalist anxieties about the ability to defend and protect one's culture and territory. When a film builds its context out of mythology or imagined history, such a militaristic brawny hero can be more easily realized.

Historical films are also held to stringent standards of masculine and Hindu cultural pride and taken to task by political groups. Director Sanjay Leela Bhansali's films *Bajirao Mastani* (2015) and *Padmaavat* (2018) are among recent examples of such films. Where *Bajirao* was met with protests by the BJP, *Padmaavat* was derided by the Karni Sena, a Rajput caste group (IANS 2015; 2018). Both times, the protestors argued that the films misrepresented histories and diminished that heroic stature of the Hindu figures by having them dance inappropriately or cavort with unsuitable Muslim lovers. For instance, the *Padmaavat* protests were based on a rumor about a sex scene between the Muslim king Alauddin Khilji and the eponymous Hindu queen Padmavati. There was no such scene in the film (IANS 2018). Curiously, neither of the films had any comedic or satirical elements. Instead, they were deeply committed to immortalizing the protagonists. Both films also presented a militaristic Hindu hero who was a sensitive, chivalrous lover to gracious and brave heroines. Their stories were presented as deeply tragic, culminating in the deaths of the romantic lead pairs after they fought valiant battles. In the case of *Padmaavat*, the object of caricature was clearly the Muslim Khilji. He is shown to be an unabashedly evil sexual predator, who constantly chomps on meat while being a barbaric despot. His sidekick, Malik Gafur, is also mocked for his queer desires. Sikata Banerjee writes that Hindu nationalists imagine, "[a] hypermasculine enemy which necessitates the

recovery of a lost manhood to resist the erosion of Hindu political presence, even dominance, in India" (2017: 38). Khilji is such a visibly masculine, formidable adversary for the Hindus protagonists to triumph over by demonstrating greater physical and cultural strength. After the film was released, the Karni Sena quickly revised their opinion to say that the film celebrated the valor of their men and began promoting the film to encourage Rajput pride (IANS 2018). Both *Padmaavat* and *Bajirao Mastani* found great economic success in India and overseas. In the case of Hindu historic films, it appears that Bollywood's glamorous brawn invites belief rather than suspending disbelief.

Epic adaptations that are lacking in economic muscle and popular spectacle are less likely to remain in circulation. The genre of historical texts is the most likely to succeed but only once it is clearly established that they emphasize religious and cultural glories. On the other hand, any text that explicitly critiques Hindu epic or historical figures, especially through parody or satire[10], meets with more virulent censorship. Nagarkar's satirical play *Bedtime Story* (1977) was protested against by right-wing groups and censored by the Government for several decades, owing to its controversial presentation of caste and army brutality. It was finally published in book form nearly four decades later, in 2015. A recent example of censorship is the case of Akshat Verma's 'Mama's Boys'. A young Bollywood director, Verma made a sixteen-minute film parody in 2016 for YouTube audiences. The film attempts humorous commentary on contemporary gender relations through a re-presentation of Pandava family dynamics. Here, Bhima is an unintelligent alpha male who spends his days in the gym with his vapid girlfriend Hidimbi. He also sees the epic's fraternal polyandry as an opportunity to have a threesome to the consternation of a conscientious Arjuna. The youngest Pandava brothers, Nakula and Sahdeva are stereotypically gay fashion designers. The film is kinder to the female characters; it celebrates Draupadi's sexual agency and ends with the brothers compromising to please the matriarch Kunti.

Within days of the film being released on YouTube, the Hindu Sena, a right-wing group, filed a complaint against the film and demanded it be taken off the internet. The producers quickly acquiesced. The complaint was very specific in its objections and its wording makes it very clear that "religion" is at stake:

> Akshat Verma and the team of Mama's boy [*sic*] have deliberately and maliciously acted intending to outrage religious feelings of Hindus by insulting its religion and religious beliefs by making fun of its religious

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[10] Parodies of masculinity are better received when they are not explicitly Hindu or epic adaptations. Gayatri Gopinath (2000) has written about homosociality in Bollywood male buddy films, noting that such films open up spaces for the expression same-sex desires. Krupa Shandilya, on the other hand, has argued that there is a new genre of films that playfully parodies manliness such as *Dabangg* (2010) and later *Dabangg 2* (2012).

book. The content of the film may also be made objectionable under article 19(2) of Constitution of India (Sehrawat 2016).

The group was especially uncomfortable with the two homosexual characters. Even though Nakula and Sahdeva's sexualities are not discussed in the epic, the Sanskrit text embraces a range of gender identities, which has been discussed by scholars such as Andrea Custodi (2007). Newer, popular understandings of the epic and by extension Hinduism, are compelled or censored until they are sometimes more conservative than the Sanskrit epic itself. This includes zealously guarding essentialist views while eliminating any texts that attempt to critique masculinity or Hindu tradition. It appears that the Mahabharata is no laughing matter.

Conclusion: Global Solidarities and Limitations

Epic adaptations provide occasions for the expression and proliferation of hegemonic gender roles while standardizing Hinduism for the nation and the globe. They are influential movers of culture that have extended afterlives in popular genres and new media. This not only includes print and cinematic venues such as the graphic novel and Bollywood, but also social media such as WordPress, Blogspot, YouTube, and Twitter. Such interactive media provides interested users, who may otherwise be geographically dispersed, with sources of cultural material that can be easily accessed, debated, and defended. As Sreedharan and Panicker's texts suggest, these new epic versions are often in conversation with one another across borders. These materials are then employed to stake a claim to a religious homogeneity that binds persons who then perform and confirm the same values. Such texts re-organize and define Hindu culture while outlining the goals of Hindus, whether native or diasporic. By the 21st century, these goals include being an assertive force in the global economy while also calling attention to the richness and righteousness of one's cultural origins. Given the Sanskrit epic's length and complexity, any re-presentation of the epic is likely to be a condensation or a simplification. However, it is cause for concern when such reductive readings turn exclusionary. While muscular Mahabharatas announce the arrival of Hindus in the global arena, they can also encourage facile and dangerous beliefs about gender and its relationship to national politics and Hinduism.

The Mahabharata continues to be framed as an argument for Hindu might and grit. While such a vision of heroic male and occasionally female Hindus[11] may be empowering, it also misrepresents the realities of India, which is a battleground of

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[11] Recently, the portrayal of muscularity has also been expanded to include some women heroes. Graphic novelists such as Amruta Patil in *Adi Parva* (2012) and Ira Mukhoty in *Heroines* (2017) have attempted to imagine female characters such as Draupadi and Ganga as role models for a new generation of female readers. However, these portrayals still remain within the same parameters of bravery and physical strength while paying superficial obeisance to *stri-shakti* (woman power).

gender inequity and sexual violence. Muscular Hindu texts also leave little room for relationships of mutual caregiving between a range of sexual identities and religious beliefs. Whether implicitly or explicitly, they marginalize members and narratives of other Indian religions, lower caste persons, women, and LGBTQ persons who do not fit into this specifically militaristic Hindu criterion. Hindu men themselves could be excluded or denigrated if they do not fit muscular parameters. While reclaiming cultural glory is a worthy cause for any postcolonial nation state, a national citizenry that continues to fight among itself is unlikely to realize its ambitions on the global stage. Therefore, while muscular adaptations are assertive and propitious, they should also be examined for their potential to limit multivalent expressions of identities and politics.

Contemporary epic adaptations, muscular or otherwise, transpose cultural worlds specifically connected to the roots of modern India beyond its boundaries. The journey of rehearsing and reaffirming a Hindu identity through epic adaptations continues in the 21st century. It has taken a new turn—hegemonic Hindu identity is now also organized around masculinity in a global capitalist economy. The retellings of the epics have less to do with how the Hindus were in past and more to do with who and how they wish to be in the present and future. Whether as writers in a global literary market or as agents of political change within and outside the Indian nation, Hindus are looking to stake their claim to culture and capital in the world. The presence of these new epic adaptations also leads to squabbles over the sanctity of allegedly Hindu values and immutability of "Indian culture". Reductive readings of the epic are being downloaded and debated in new media spaces. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are filled with pictures of adaptations being read and viewed, with hashtags proclaiming the uniqueness of Mahabharata adaptations but also marking them as the singularly Hindu roots of a pan-Indian culture. Other social media users are expected to respond to these images in solidarity or are shamed for being "anti-national" or not respecting their "own culture." The epic's and indeed India's futures are in these digital and global spaces, where loyalties will be performed in wide-ranging and often insidious ways.

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Digital Mūrtis, Virtual Darśan and a Hindu Religioscape

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Abstract

With the development of communication technology, images of the divine in Hindu traditions have entered virtual spaces where they are tapped, dragged, copied, saved, and otherwise transformed from print to virtual, physical to digital; Images may be transported from the context of a temple in India to a mobile phone in America or the context of a temple in America to a mobile phone in India. This ethnographic study examines online darsan videos of the guru as they are experienced by devotees in the United States and in India in the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminaryan Sanstha or BAPS Swaminarayan tradition. I argue that the transnational aspects of BAPS is a religioscape constituted in part by *darśan* of the guru. These global flows of images and videos of the guru and deity which makeup the religioscape are evident in their internet presences.

Keywords: Religioscape, Darśan, transnational Hinduism, Digital Mūrtis

Introduction: Darśan in Person and Online

On a temperate December morning in 2014, in the small town of Sarangpur in Eastern Gujarat, India, hundreds of women and men sat waiting in a temporary tent next to a Swaminarayan *mandir* (temple) in anticipation of their guru's *darśan.* While the crowded tent was filled with chatter, a video began to play of the previous day's *darśan.* This video, publicly available on YouTube, was accessible to the women I was sitting next to only in the context of gatherings at *mandirs* in larger towns or cities where the videos were screened. The women came from a nearby town in which Internet access was not common, and the media they did employ was often through basic cellphones. While I sat quizzing the women about their reasons for coming (*darśan* and doing *seva* or service in the *mandir* kitchen for the day) and where they were from (a village a few hours walking distance from there) a hush suddenly fell over the crowd. The women I was speaking with turned their attention towards the raised platform and folded their hands in front of them. The time for talking was over. The 93-year old guru, Pramukh Swami Maharaj (Sadhu Narayanswarupdas) (1921-2016), had arrived; *Darśan* was taking place.

The practice of *darśan* was first brought to the fore of academic understanding of Hindu images through the foundational works of Lawrence Babb and Diana Eck, both serendipitously published in the same year. Each described *darśan* as

a visual exchange between divinities and persons. *Darśan* is "given" by living gurus or *mūrtis* of deities and "taken" by devotees (Eck 1981: 5). Babb notes the ways in which devotees' desire for a guru's *darśan* led to the proliferation of photos of the guru. (Babb 1981: 387). With the development of communication technology, these same photos have entered virtual places where they are tapped, dragged, copied, saved, and otherwise transformed from print to virtual, physical to digital, bodied to disembodied. Images may be transported from the context of a temple in India to a mobile phone in the U.S. or the context of a temple in the U.S. to a mobile phone in India. As the Internet enters Hindu devotees' lives, Hindu deities and gurus enter the Internet. Digital photos and videos, like printed, painted or sculpted images of the guru, form a means of iterating a relationship with the guru and therefore, with the deity. Yet, digital photos and videos can manifest anywhere at any time and harken to another specific place and time. Thus, it seems that the creative breadth and depth of *darśan* allows for not only an experience of distant places, but of disparate moments as well. Images of the guru in the website and phone applications of the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS) are one example of the ubiquity and plasticity of images of the guru in Hindu traditions.

The Swaminarayan tradition was established in Gujarat by Sahajanand, also known as Swaminarayan. He is understood in the BAPS Swaminarayan tradition to be *puruṣottama* or the supreme deity, and the gurus are known as *akṣara*, a distinct metaphysical entity and the fullest extent of Swaminarayan's presence outside of Swaminarayan himself (Gadhia 2016).[1] The BAPS community expanded with Gujarati immigration and travels of the gurus in the 20th and 21st centuries (Brahmbhatt 2014: 102-103). Yogiji Maharaj (Sadhu Gnanjivandas) (1892-1971) traveled from India to meet devotees in East Africa and the UK (Vivekjivandas, et al., 2016). The travels of Pramukh Swami Maharaj to Europe, Africa, Australia, and North America continued to draw BAPS adherents from primarily Indian Gujarati diasporic communities. Since the death of Pramukh Swami Maharaj in 2016, Mahant Swami Maharaj (Sadhu Keshavjivandas) (born 1933) the sixth guru in the lineage of gurus of the sanstha, has traveled in India and around the world. (http://pramukhswami.org/spiritual-lineage).[2]

The BAPS YouTube channel began on February 7, 2008, about three years after YouTube was founded. Once on the YouTube site https://www.youtube.com/bapschannel devotees are able to click through a variety of *darśan* videos. This Youtube channel created in 2008 includes playlists such as festivals by year, and a separate playlist for "Blessings by Pramukh Swami Maharaj." The accumulation of this recorded corpus of the guru's life is available

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[1] For a theological explication of these concepts from the perspective of a BAPS Sadhu see Sadhu Paramtattvadas' *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hindu Theology.*

[2] The Gujarati diaspora which forms the majority of BAPS adherents abroad was not always formed through a uni-directional immigration from India to elsewhere (Williams, 2001: 54). Several of the individuals interviewed in this study were from families who had emigrated from India to Kenya to the United Kingdom, and then/or from the United Kingdom to America, and so on.

for use at any time and at any place to access and experience what may have previously been temporally or geographically distant.

The BAPS website, now www.baps.org, originally www.swaminarayan.org, was launched on March 2, 1999, almost ten years after the conception of the World Wide Web. (Swaminarayan Aksharpith, "History and Milestones"). A devotee-volunteer who helps to maintain the BAPS website cited the "Daily Darshan" and "Vicharan" webpages as the most frequently visited. This traffic cannot account for the messaging of *darśan* images through texting applications, which many devotees in the U.S. as well as India suggested was a common method for obtaining photos and videos of the deity and the guru. I note here the Internet use and access to the baps.org website to bring attention to the broader context in which these webpages are used.

The "Daily Satsang" webpage contains a photo of *mūrtis* of the deity Swaminarayan along with the location of the *mandir* where the *mūrti is installed* below the image. It also includes an image of the guru without a location or date listed, a story about the deity or guru in English, a story about the deity or guru in Gujarati, an excerpt from the *Vachanamrut,* the principal text of the tradition, a list of major events in BAPS history on the current date, and audio of the *Vachanamrut* as well as *Swamini Vato,* another sacred text of the tradition. The "Daily Satsang" iphone and android application provides the same information— the phone and tablet application is an iteration of this webpage.

But what kind of media are the YouTube videos and "Daily Satsang" images? When shared via social media such as Twitter and Facebook they may become social media. When shared or uploaded onto messaging services, they are part of interpersonal communication. When the images are viewed in public gatherings, they can be considered as part of a new category of congregational media. The examples in this study traverse each of these categories simultaneously, illustrating the creative depth of *darśan.*

The experience of *darśan* and creation of *mūrtis* have sectarian differences even within a tradition. Interpreting images online thus requires both geographic and sectarian specificity in addition to considerations of other aspects of context. Phyllis Herman's work "Seeing the Divine Through Windows: Online Darshan and Virtual Religious Experience" provides an effective examination of Swaminarayan media and *darśan* in The U.S. Herman argues that the Vadtal Swaminarayan sect's Downey, California, *mandir* website content, which includes congregational activities, photo updates of pilgrimages and pictures taken of temple *mūrtis* posted under a "daily *darshan*" webpage, has transformed or created ways of seeing. Herman notes how these desktop wallpaper images are transported *mūrtis* to different landscapes. In contrast, the videos and images from the baps.org website and Youtube channel convey varying landscapes by specifying the context in which videos and photos were taken. The desktop wallpapers with photoshopped images in the download section of the website are limited to backgrounds of various colors and/or a calendar. In both the Downey *mandir* and the BAPS Swaminarayan examples I examine in the U.S. and India, the Internet enhances *darśan* by bringing together spatial and temporal differences.

The Internet transforms the practice of *darśan* in several ways, the most significant of which being the now variegated contexts of the *mūrtis* enshrined in *mandirs* and thus the increased access of viewers with Internet for taking *darśan*. The "Daily Darshan" and "Vicharan" pages list the locations of the *mūrti* under each photograph or in each video. Listing the diverse locations of the installed *mūrtis* and the locations of the travels of the guru allow devotees to imagine participation in a global BAPS neighborhood through *darśan*. Each location of the embedded *mūrti* is one node of the virtual, networked neighborhood. In what follows, I will delineate the transnational nature of religion and provide one possible analytic for the web presences of deities and gurus online.

Above: An image from the "daily darshan" application as it would be viewed by devotees.

A 'Religioscape' formed by Darśan

Understanding the intermingling of the global and virtual with the local has perhaps been most effectively approached by Arjun Appadurai who suggests that there are five types of global flows or "scapes" that categorize the cultures of the "modern moment" that is the present. These are: ethnoscapes, technoscapes, mediascapes, ideoscapes and financescapes (Appadurai, 33: 1996.) Perhaps due to Appadurai's emphasis on deterritorialization within the modern moment, the ways in which the five "scapes" interact with religious practice is largely absent. Most often, within Appadurai's discussion of "scapes" one finds religion tucked into a laundry-list of aspects of nationalism such as history, blood, warfare, occupation, class, language, race, and soil. Perhaps as a result, everyday religious practice is not a primary consideration in Appadurai's discussion.

Although one might effectively describe a transnational religious practice in terms of the people (ethnoscapes), technology (machinery), money (financescapes),

images (mediascapes), or ideas (ideascapes), (Appadurai, 1996: 37), religious practice can at most be a tangential consideration within these five scapes whose primary aspects are not religion. The scapes closest to religious identity, however is certainly "ethnoscapes" or "landscapes of group identity" that are "no longer tightly territorialized, spatially bounded, historically unselfconscious, or culturally homogenous" (Appadurai, 1996: 48).[3] While this description might fit well under the rubric of a religious community or identity, it cannot provide a full account of everyday religion. Thus, to describe a set of transnational flows which center on everyday religious practice, I engage the concept of 'religioscape' first asserted by Rachel Dwyer (2004) to describe the BAPS community in the U.K. Although the BAPS *mandir* Dwyer examines has many Gujarati practitioners and therefore perhaps one ethnic group which might indicate an 'ethnoscape', Dwyer suggests the term religioscape as a way of contending with the complex and variegated identities of British Indians. Accordingly, Arun Brahmbhatt alludes to Appadurai's ethnoscape and Dwyer's religioscape in his discussion of social service in BAPS to describe the ways in which it is "mediated by the experience of globality" insofar as "specific types of service activities in which members of BAPS are engaged have been developed by various global flows of people and ideas" (Brahmbhatt 2014: 118). In what follows, I engage and extend this concept of religioscape. I first provide the general context of religious use of videos and photos, before further elaborating the ways in which BAPS' religioscape is created, arguing that it is established and sustained through gurus past and present and the numerous iterations of their photos and videos transposed to a globally-available digital form.

Before examining *darśan* in the U.S., in India, and online, I offer a brief note on the methodology necessary for traversing this diverse terrain. To contend with ethnoscapes, Appadurai suggests a "cosmopolitan" or "macro" ethnography, the task of which is "the unraveling of a conundrum: what is the nature of locality as a lived experience in a globalized, de territorialized world?" (Appadurai 1996: 52). I take on the task of macroethnography by starting with an examination of the complex, networked experience of religion in spaces both physical and virtual. I move transnationally to first observe the experiences of online *darśan* from the perspective of devotees viewing media in the U.S. and India before detailing aspects of the local and transnational in the media itself.

Although I will be unable to explore the specific ways in which religioscapes are constituted generally, the variation of their composition within religious traditions warrants further inquiry. *Darśan* as the center of a religioscape seems to be specific to Hindu traditions. The constitutive factor of religioscapes may be established through various sacred persons, objects, practices or even places which create flows of people within and among Appadurai's 'scapes.' By way of example, practitioners of Santeria in Aisha Beliso-De Jesus' work saw "...a link between technological electricity and the spiritual energy of copresences" (Beliso-De Jesus, 2015: kindle location 1066). The audio-visual components were thus

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[3] Appadurai asserts that imagination factors heavily into these landscapes; Imagined possibilities create realities. Although I will be unable to explore imagination in depth, I must note that the imagined possibility of connection with the guru through darśan is undoubtedly a factor in the religious practices I will be examining here.

as significant as the *electrical currents* within the videos themselves. Unlike Beliso-De Jesus' examination of Santeria, the Hindu practitioners interviewed clearly identified the visual components of video (rather than aural, textual, or electrical currents within the devices that produce them for example) as the presence of the deity or guru. Thus, the aspects of the Internet that constitute religioscapes even in terms of visuality vary significantly and are on a continuum with dominant modalities of offline religion pre- Internet use.

The prevalence of photos and videos for online *darśan* in the BAPS Swaminarayan tradition is a sample of a larger Hindu Gujarati milieu in which live *darśan* video of *mūrti*s in *mandirs* are increasingly common. For example, on the phone application and Internet website cleverly titled i2i.live, live *darśan* from a variety of different *mandirs* in Gujarat "eye to eye" between the devotee and deity is given through live streaming. In addition to the curated collection of *darśan* from around Gujarat that is i2i.live, individual mandirs such as the Somnath *mandir* provide live *darśan* as well as *mandir* information on their website: http://www.somnath.org/home/live-darshan. The *pravacan* or religious discourse in Swadhyay (literally "self-study")—a Hindu religious movement with its origins in Maharashtra which is prevalent in Gujarat—is an example of the prominent role of video *darśan* in Hindu traditions. Within Swadhyay, "video technology allows what was previously impossible— namely, a global religious movement organized around participation in a sacred group experience that traditionally depends on the physical presence of a sacred figure." (Little 1995: 256)

In the BAPS Swaminarayan tradition, it is primarily the travels and speeches or blessings (*ashirwaad)* of the guru form the basis of the *darśan* videos. The videos can be found on the "Vicharan" (travels) webpage of the baps.org site and the sanstha's YouTube channel. In all of these examples, the divine, recorded around the world, is seen by individuals and communities globally wherever devotees choose to access these videos. Time and place are carefully recorded and subsequently recalled and sometimes simultaneously transmitted to bring the devotee to the time and place of *darśan*.

Darśan of the Guru as Interaction with the Guru

In the example of *darśan* of the guru in India with which we began the present inquiry, we see that *darśan* is understood as interaction with the guru; Doing *darśan* of the guru meant the women turned their attention to the guru and folded their hands. Later, I saw that *darśan* seemed to create an interaction of sight as well as responses such as clapping and laughter to the guru's actions and words. After this *darśan* was over, I met Nirali[4], a woman born in Kenya and raised in the United Kingdom who had traveled to this small town in Gujarat specifically for the *darśan* of the guru. For this devotee, like many of the other devotees I interviewed for a total of three months between 2012 and 2014 in India and the US, *darśan* taken in person was an interaction with the guru. While Pramukh Swami Maharaj had traveled in India and abroad throughout his life,

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[4] Psuedonyms are used throughout.

Nirali recalled, he had settled more recently in this small town of Sarangpur. Despite the availability of *darśan* of the guru online and the fact that Nirali did not personally meet with the guru due to his ascetic vows, having in-person *darśan* was an interaction that warranted traveling to India from the U.K. When I asked about the differences between *darśan* in person versus *darśan* online she said that both were similar. However, when I asked about the previous day's *darśan* being screened via Youtube for the gathered devotees before the in-person *darśan,* Nirali, who was present for the previous day's *darśan,* explained:

> I think with the live one you don't know what's coming so there's a lot more anticipation. Bapa [affectionate name for the guru] does things and you're not expecting him to. There's something different in that you don't know what's coming. In the other videos [on YouTube] it's just recalling all the memories. There's actually the same amount of bliss. I appreciate the live experience much more when looking back on the videos. I wouldn't have known there were that many people at the time. I feel blessed to be there and I was there and this is what happened so I feel much much more grateful when looking at the videos. I suppose the emotional side of it is all the same. There's just the added part that you don't know what's coming next. It's exciting, it's a bit more exciting.

Like Nirali who found live *darśan* more exciting, several devotees interviewed noted a gradation of experience with these different types of *darśan*. For example, some devotees noted that in-person *darśan* was "real" and online *darśan* was a partial imitation of the physical *mūrti.* Most often, devotees described online experiences as somewhere in-between a physical *mūrti* of the guru and the presence of the guru in-person. In the latter case, videos of the guru when on the screen seemed to serve as an aperture to the actual person that is the guru. The practice of *darśan* is thus not simply a practice of seeing the guru or deity, but interacting with him or her. In this regard, Kim (2001: 361) notes, "Darshan of Pramukh Swami is more than the application of the gaze… It is the desire to embed personally acquired sensations and perceptions of the guru into the mind and to have these perceptions reinforce the relationship between guru and disciple". *Darśan* online seems to serve as an interaction that supplements *darśan* taken in person.

Darśan Through Screens: The Virtual is the Real

With the Internet, *darśan* evolves from the traditional multi-sensory and inter-subjective experience of intermingled smells, sounds, sights, tastes, and textures in a *mandir* with bells, incense, flowers, *prasad,* and other worshippers to a bi-sensory experience of sound and sight accessed through a screen. Yet the feeling of relating to the deity, guru and other devotees is still transmitted through the visual (and to some extent the aural). Regarding the role of the visual in the relationship with the guru in the BAPS Swaminarayan tradition, Kim observes:

This association for most satsangis begins with the sense of vision, of seeing Pramukh Swami in action, of watching his movements, of gazing at his *mūrti*

during puja or at the *mandir*, and of constantly attempting to mentally visualise the image of guru and Lord during the course of their daily lives…Beginning with the eye, the other senses and the mind become engaged to the object of the guru and the whole being is emotionally provoked into the gradual process of understanding the guru beyond his corporeality (Kim 2001: 377).

Darśan of the video begins to transcend time and place when devotees watching the videos in different contexts – days or years after the video was recorded – feel that they are able to experience the specific moment in the past. The uses of the "Daily Darshan" webpage on the *baps.org* website and mobile application, the "Vicharan" webpage and its YouTube channel, the global flows of devotees and the imagination of *darśan* all center around *darśan* of the guru and create the BAPS religioscape.

Not all of the BAPS Swaminarayan use of the Internet comprise the BAPS Swaminarayan religioscape, however. In addition to the main baps.org website, the BAPS Swaminarayan *mandir* websites of Los Angeles and Atlanta both share similar formatting, containing the same tabs labeled "Visitor info," "Mandir Info," a "Media Gallery," "News," "Upcoming Events," "Tour Reservations," "Murti Darshan," and "Gifts & Snacks." Rather than information about the BAPS Swaminarayan tradition's theology or information about the BAPS Swaminarayan activities and entity which are included on the *baps.org* website, both of these websites primarily offer information about accessing the physical *mandir* or future and past events in the *mandir*. Aside from the "mūrti darshan," which appears to offer daily uploaded photos of the deities in the central sanctums, these websites communicate directly information about the physical *mandir* site.[5]

While each *darśan* video has different content, they all begin with an iteration of the geographic and temporal locatedness of the deity and guru. The location and date of the video is written in English along with an image of the *mandir* in which the guru's *darśan* was recorded. The viewer is taken through the sanctums of the *mandir* before the guru is introduced onto the screen — often doing *pūjā* and/or *darśan* himself. In this sense, *darśan* of the guru comes subsequent to *darśan* of the deity. In regard to the *mūrti* of Swaminarayan, Brosius' states that online darśan "…allows the visitor to worship Lord Swaminarayan as he is presented for online mūrti darshan with reference to his mūrtis' placement in any of the seven hundred temples worldwide" (Brosius 2010: 456). Additionally, the image of the deity which appears online is frequently depicted with Gunatitanand Swami, the first incarnation of the form of Akshar. This layered *darśan,* wherein the viewer does *darśan* of the deity and then darśan of the guru doing *darśan* of the deity further highlights the significance of seeing the divine. In addition to this layered *darśan,* video recordings of the guru's public interactions include the guru performing *puja,* the guru speaking to the gathered devotees or sitting and listening to male devotees speaking to the assembly.

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[5] See Kim's "Work-in-Progress: The BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha on the Web" (2012) for an examination of the swaminarayan.org website (now baps.org) in terms of its multiple Internet publics.

These videos of the guru online create a mobile *darśan* experience. This poses immediate questions: Does photo-iconography change the inherent reciprocity of *darśan*? Similarly, *darśan* through technology is "taken" by the devotee, but can it be said to be "given" by the guru and can the guru then see that devotee?[6] The answers to these questions varied among the devotees interviewed. While devotees differed in their conception of online media, their use of media for devotion had shared characteristics. Individuals viewed the most recent video in their homes and in community gatherings, shared pictures of the guru they enjoyed with other devotees, and so on. These activities were also practiced by Indian devotees interviewed.

Devotees that I interviewed in 2012 in *mandirs* in the U.S. described the prominence of *darśan* in the guru-disciple relationship in the BAPS Swaminarayan tradition. Although all devotees mentioned practices such as *āratī* and *pūjā* as moments where they did *darśan* the other methods varied widely. These practices included singing of *bhajans*, *mānsi pūjā* or meditation on/mental worship of the deity or the guru, *smṛti* or remembering *darśan* done in the past, reading sacred texts, listening to *katha* or religious discourses, and viewing photos of the deity or the guru. While viewing photos of the deity or guru is a common method of *darśan*, all of these methods involve *darśan* in some sense. Indeed, devotees sometimes focused on specific types of worship to explain *darśan*. Older devotees focused primarily on *āratī*, reading, *mānsi* (mental meditation of the divinity) and having *darśan* of photos affixed around their home or office. Dinesh, an elderly man born in Gujarat, who I interviewed in Los Angeles, California, recalled for me the ways in which he did *darśan* every day:

> I actually do darśan every morning. I go into my pūjā room, and I close my eyes and I do his darśan at least three to four times before I leave for the office. [I do] my pūjā and I make tea and then do darśan. Before I leave for office I do darśan, and even at work, sometimes when there is some, you know everyone gets tired at work for one reason or another, get [sic] frustrated, I close my eyes and remember him.

In closing his eyes to see the guru, Dinesh indicates the imaginative components inherent in *darśan*. As Karapanagiotis (2013) also suggests, mental images of the deity share similarities with and make possible digital *mūrtis* (67).[7] These

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[6] This of course is Eck's question about darśan generally: "…Hindus say that the deity or the sadhu "gives darśan" (darśan denā is the Hindi expression), and the people "take darśan" (darśan lenā). What does this mean? What is given and what is taken?" (Eck 1981: 6).

[7] Although digital *darśan* does not play a role in this elderly devotee's daily praxis, he viewed these YouTube videos in public gatherings meant that it is part of his weekly praxis. In contrast, younger devotees were more likely to reference their use of their phones and sometimes computers to access the "Daily Darshan" app or view YouTube videos in their daily praxis. Indeed, the ways in which devotees accessed these images frequently varied between geographic location, age, gender, and class. By way of example, many of the women I spoke to in Gujarat suggested that they did not access the website or phone applications because they had limited or no access to the Internet for economic reasons, limited experience with technology, and/or their phone, if they had one, contained only calling and texting features. Yet, Internet media played a substantial role in the lives of these women through the public viewings of *darśan* videos of the guru in Sunday gatherings in urban places and the circulation of images through texting and texting applications.

imaginative/mental components may contribute to the ways in which photos and images minimize the distance between America and India.

The most acute example of the nature of the video and its ability to reduce disparities of time and place is the Akshardham (literally: the abode of *Akshar*) Shilanyas (stone laying ceremony) video from Robbinsville, New Jersey, in 2011, where a *pūjā* for the building of a new *mandir* was taking place. Through this video, one can see devotees worshipping the guru live on a screen. The video begins by contextualizing the video for the audience by displaying the date, time, location, and including scenes of the setting that the *pūjā* ceremonies took place in. Heinz Schiefinger, using various Hindu examples, provides a discussion of the relationship between *pūjā* and *darśan* in terms of embodiment, noting how "It is darshan which provides the link between the fully embodied traditional puja experience and the online puja experience" (Schiefinger 2010: 210). The *pūjā* in this video, however, had a different connection between the embodied and online as it took place in two physical locations aided by the Internet and video streaming technology.

In this *pūjā* ceremony, Pramukh Swami Maharaj, the then guru of the sect, had a virtual presence in the *pūjā* occurring in Robbinsville, New Jersey, while he himself was in Mumbai, Maharashtra. The video itself is titled "Smruti," clearly marking its intention to serve the purpose of recalling these events for devotees. The 29 minutes and 23 seconds of this video attempts to give the viewer a sense of the entire event from start to finish. Upon questioning devotees about this specific video available on YouTube, a devotee informed me that the live streaming video of the guru was done for the first pūjā and recorded versions were used for the subsequent *pūjā*s. The use of live streaming video and the subsequent use of its recording illustrate the ability for videos of the guru to facilitate *darśan* while connecting disparate localities. In this case, these localities included Mumbai and Robbinsville where the guru was present.

Above: A screenshot of the moment the garland was offered to Pramukh Swami Maharaj from the Akshardham Shilanyas youtube video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zHr1ZPUAGdo
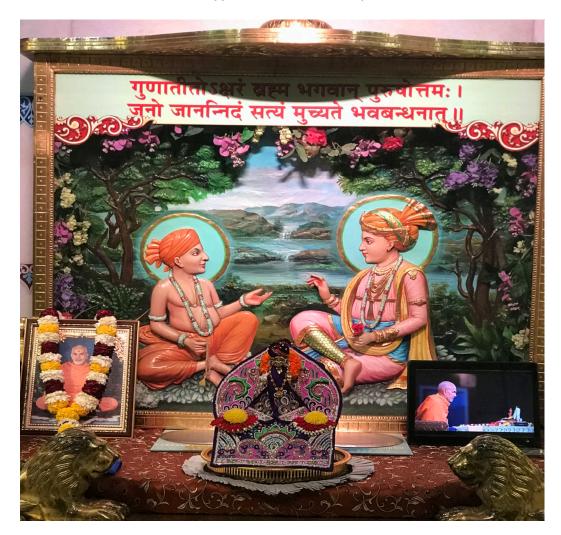.

The crucial and defining moment that reveals to us the relationship that devotees have with the screen was revealed when Mahant Swami (now the guru of the sect) and Ishwarcharan Swami (a senior sadhu in the sect) offered a flower garland to the then guru of the sect Pramukh Swami Maharaj to welcome him into the gathering of devotees for the *pūjā* in New Jersey.[8] A garland was then placed on Pramukh Swami Maharaj concurrently by two other sadhus in Mumbai. This gave the impression that what was being offered symbolically to the guru on the video feed was really being offered directly to the guru—bringing together the distant guru and disciple with a single devotional gesture. The same ritual accoutrement was present in both locations. The hanging flower adornments that framed the screen were also behind Pramukh Swami Maharaj in Mumbai. The devotees who organized the event clearly coordinated the *pūjā* decorations carefully to integrate the two *pūjā*s so that the *pūjā* being performed in Mumbai and the other in Robbinsville appeared to be one. This gave a seamless visual effect that made the two disparate locales seem joined for the ritual occasion.[9] I was unable to interview devotees to find out if this was experienced as one or two *pūjā* ceremonies and furthermore, how it was experienced in India and the U.S. Despite this limitation, this use of streaming video I have observed through

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[8] At the time of field research, videos of the guru Pramukh Swami Maharaj were frequently uploaded. Shortly after his passing in August of 2016, Mahant Swami, now known as "Mahant Swami Maharaj," became the new guru and consequently the locus for *darśan* videos.

[9] According to interviewees in India, this synchronization of *pūjā*s in different countries is the first of its kind within the BAPS Swaminarayan tradition.

the YouTube video of the event is telling for its illustration of the collapsing of time and place that occurs around the guru in this tradition.

More recently, while conducting fieldwork at a BAPS *mandir* in Surat, Gujarat in 2018, I observed a small screen within one of the inner sanctums. The screen showed a continuous slideshow of recent images of the guru. This surprising innovation illustrates the ways in which religious responses to technology continue to change as various technologies become more integrated into daily life. Within this sanctum, four types of *mūrtis* are represented.

From left to right: a printed photo of the current guru Mahant Swami; a mixed-media image of Gunatitanand Swami, the first in the lineage of gurus and the predecessor to Mahant Swami along with the deity Swaminarayan; metal *mūrti* of "Thakorji" or Swaminarayan in the center; and (at the moment this photo was taken) a digital photo of Mahant Swami worshipping a metal *mūrti* of Swaminarayan similar to the center *mūrti* in this photo.

These layered *mūrtis* of different materials illustrate the ways in which *darśan* in its digital form is not just experienced transnationally on the Internet, it is also experienced locally in *mandirs*. Traditionally, there are eight types of *mūrtis* listed in the *Bhagwat Purana* verse 11.27.12— stone, wood, metal, clay or sandalwood paste, paint, sand, precious stones or metals, and the mind (Karapagionotis 2010: 180). Within the *Vachanamrut,* this same list of eight types of *mūrtis* along

with the addition of 'the Sant' or guru is present (Vac. Gad I 68).[10] Thus, if we examine this single sanctum alone, we see numerous iterations of Swaminarayan. Of the eight types of *mūrtis* mentioned in the *Bhagwat Purana* or the addition of the guru in the *Vachanamrut*, printed photographs or digital photographs are of course absent. The presence of printed images and of course the screen with the changing photographs illustrates the ways in which the visual conveys both meaning and presence across disparate places and times.

Conclusions

BAPS is a religioscape constituted in part by *darśan* of the guru. The global flows of images and videos of the guru and deity which makeup the religioscape are observable through their internet presences. These images and videos are used for *bhakti* to connect disparate places and times, recall past events, or create new connections with the guru. But as *mūrtis* conform to their mediums, they also convey the content of their antecedents. Digital photographs of gurus and *mūrtis* visually serve as an aperture for their presence and personality. Digital images change the experience of *darśan* by altering the access to temporal, spatial and sensorial elements of *darśan*. And, as I have illustrated, digital images also keep the experience of *darśan* the same. These digital images enable *darśan* worldwide. They are also part of complex networks; they are part of a web. Textual descriptions and visual allusions of the locatedness of the deity and guru below photos of enshrined *mūrtis* or within videos of the guru help to mitigate against place and time to create a network of *mūrtis* and a kaleidoscope of visual records of the guru— all to bring deity and guru near the devotee.

Although I was unable to explore the affective dimensions here, I must note however briefly that in many interviews the impetus for *darśan* and experiences of *darśan* were described as intensely affective and emotional. The affective and emotional economies that create religioscapes and other global flows are fertile grounds for interrogation. Additionally, visual *darśan* and its connection to the theological *darśanas*— insofar as both are perspectives which inform the creation of images of the divine— is a significant component of Internet *darśan* and *darśan* generally which I have been unable to examine here. While *darśan* is a way of seeing and the *darśanas* are schools of Hindu thought, both dually respond to images of the divine and inform the creation of images of the divine. Understanding this complex dynamic, particularly in terms of online images of the divine and the multiple (potentially infinite) cultural contexts of the Internet would be a useful future inquiry.

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[10] See Williams (1985) for more on the relationship between the guru and deity in the BAPS Swaminarayan tradition.

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Secular Conflict: Challenges in the Construction of the Chino Hills BAPS Swaminarayan Temple

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Abstract

In secular nations, the government mediates between religion and other elements of society while navigating the secular principles underlying the nation's democracy. Through a study of a dispute surrounding the construction of a Hindu *mandir*, or traditional place of worship, in Chino Hills, California, this paper examines how such secular power operates in the context of local laws and governmental decision-making. In Chino Hills, the proposed *mandir* of the *Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha* (BAPS) initially faced intense opposition in the local community. Many residents asserted that core traditional architectural elements of the proposed structure would disrupt the city's natural beauty. Some even suggested that the very existence of the *mandir* would prompt unwelcome changes in the city's religious, cultural, and demographic makeup. This paper examines the role that a *mandir*, as a public space for worship and community engagement, plays for Hindu immigrants in the United States. Additionally, this paper critically examines the local government's ensuing decision-making process concerning the *mandir* and its design, and explores how democratic processes and laws impact the lives and religious expression of a diasporic Hindu community.

Keywords: secular, Hinduism, diaspora, Swaminarayan, BAPS, space, zoning laws, religious expression, religious freedom, community

Indians have immigrated to the United States and Canada in significant numbers since the mid-1960s. Each immigrant "comes as a private individual, selected by impersonal preference categories in the immigration laws and impelled by individual initiative. Soon, however, these individuals become identified by the groups through which they express their ethnicity and negotiate their relations with the host society" (Williams, 1988:7). This wave of immigration included a number of devotees of the Swaminarayan tradition who would similarly confront the need to negotiate their identity as Indian Swaminarayan Hindus living in the United States.

Some suggest that American Hinduism has developed in response to the institutionalization of Hinduism in the United States as a source of Indian culture, as well as a means of recognition and validation through politics (Kurien, 2007:2). This position, however, does not take into account the desire and choice on the part of Hindu immigrants to be a part of a community on the basis of their religious and spiritual inclinations. Though Prema Kurien suggests that, despite initially experiencing feelings of alienation, immigrants rely on religion as they find their own place in society (Kurien, 2007:2), it could be argued that some immigrants choose not to rely on religion as an identifier to avoid alienation in the United States. The protections and freedoms provided in the First Amendment of the United States' Constitution allows immigrants to come together and thrive as a religious community, and also contribute to the overall perception that the nation is multicultural. In this sense, religion acts as a primary social category, providing immigrants with a recognizable identity and thereby a route to acceptance in their host society; their religious affiliation thereby serves as a catalyst for societal acceptance while allowing immigrants to maintain a critical aspect of their self-identities (Kurien, 2007:2).

Religious organizations often facilitate the creation of communities in the diaspora. The existence of a forum in which to interact and connect with others who share the same religious beliefs and practices creates an environment wherein individuals can jointly create a collective identity. This sense of community is often enhanced by the development of a place of worship or congregation these individuals can call their own.

However, such efforts to develop a place of worship frequently must navigate both local zoning laws and the prevailing attitudes of the local population, which have typically shaped the local zoning laws—a dynamic that sets the stage for potential conflicts between religious expression, secular regulation, and public sentiments. On occasion, immigrant groups' efforts to build a place of worship (or to repurpose an existing structure into one) prompts vocal disagreement from local community members concerned about traffic, noise, or zoning issues. These concerns may be genuine, but at times may be pretexts for other, more discriminatory, sentiments. The First Amendment of the United States Constitution guarantees freedoms concerning religion, expression, assembly, and the right to petition. The First Amendment prohibits Congress from making a law respecting the establishment of religion or preventing the free exercise thereof, but under U.S law these protections have certain limitations and permit some degree of government involvement in religious matters. In the past, many Americans have understood this set of rights to be precisely *the* definition of "secularism,"—a clear separation of Church and State. Some have argued that the promise of religious freedom in particular is a relatively unique one in the world, suggesting that "America's rich religious pluralism today is a direct result of our commitment to religious freedom" (Eck, 2002:41). However, others argue that this commitment is, in fact flawed in the way society

labels immigrants. People of color, including immigrants, often feel that they are given an identity by society, in the form of ethnic or religious labels, and are thus unable to create or find an identify for themselves with respect to how they see themselves living in America. Questions therefore remain about how the ideal of secularism operates in practice in the United States, in a multitude of contexts and conflicts. Through an exploration of the narrative of the construction of a BAPS Swaminarayan Hindu *mandir* in Chino Hills, California, this paper examines the ways in which zoning laws can serve as a tool to regulate religion, as well as some of the challenges that threaten the fulfillment of the secular ideal in practice.

The Role of Mandirs in the Hindu Diaspora

Hindu immigrants in the United States frequently find themselves facing "negative racial, cultural, and religious stereotypes" (Kurien, 2007:10). Transnational feminist scholar Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003:2) argues that borders or lines of difference, containment, and conflict are not simply perceived, but are in fact quite real. As will be demonstrated in the case study to follow, these sentiments of being perceived as different and treated with prejudice often have a conscious or unconscious influence on the ways immigrants of color and their families navigate their identities in a country where not everyone looks or sounds the same. For some, this leads to an attempt at complete assimilation into their host society. For others, this fosters the desire to forge relations based on familiarity in their new setting, for example, by recreating a Hindu community in which they can maintain and celebrate their traditions, religion, language, memories, festivals, and friendships. In furtherance of this goal, many immigrants become increasingly committed to religious groups and practices after their arrival in the United States (Williams, 2001:198).

The value of building 'Hindu' communities stems from immigrants' desire to instill in their children faith, spirituality, and other aspects of Hindu culture and values. Many second-generation Hindus are also able to find support in one another, as they straddle their dual identities as both Indian/Indian diaspora and American. The development of religious-based communities for Hindu immigrants has in many cases prompted religious organizations to proliferate across the United States, which facilitates a degree of accommodation of religion and community. This facilitation, in turn, has brought about the formation of congregational communities and the construction of Hindu *mandirs*. Congregationalism, or group worship, while not necessarily a central component to all varieties of Hinduism, is a key aspect for certain Hindu groups like, but not limited to, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), and has contributed to the defining and construction of identity in the Hindu-American diaspora.

Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS)

Almost a century following the founding of the Swaminarayan *Sampradaya* by Sahajanand Swami, also known as Swaminarayan, a *sadhu* by the name of Shastri Yagnapurushdas, later known as Shastriji Maharaj, established the *Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha* (hereafter referred to as "BAPS") in 1907 (Brahmbhatt, 2016:102). Unlike the doctrine of other groups within the Swaminarayan *sampradaya*, in which Swaminarayan "is not necessarily seen to occupy the space of ultimate reality (or *Purna Purushottam*)" (Kim, 2010:362), Shastriji Maharaj argued that Swaminarayan is *Purna Purushottam*. Shastriji Maharaj built the first five large, spired, stone BAPS *mandirs* (Kim, 2010:365). The first of these *mandirs* was completed in 1907 in the village of Bochasan, located in central Gujarat. It was the first to have the *murtis* (divine images) of both Swaminarayan and *Akshar* in the central shrine (Kim, 2010:365). Hanna Kim suggests that this history highlights the emphasis placed on the building of *shikharbadh (*four-pinnacled) *mandirs* in BAPS as a means of conveying Swaminarayan philosophy (Kim, 2010:365). Kim also explains that although the architecture of BAPS *mandirs* are similar to the architectural styles of the *mandirs* built by Swaminarayan, "the first carved stone BAPS *mandirs* are unambiguous heralds of a new devotionalism, one that celebrates both the ultimate reality, *purushottam*, and the means, in the form of the Guru, by which the devotee can offer eternal devotion to the ultimate reality" (Kim, 2010:362). Scholars have noted that Swaminarayan *mandirs* were "conceived not only as a place for worship but also as a social institution where the ascetics counselled the community of followers" (Vasavada, 2016:263), which is a trait that has carried through to BAPS *mandirs* today*.*

Approximately a decade prior to the time of Shastriji Maharaj's death in 1951, "BAPS also saw its first sustained migration outside of Gujarat and the Indian subcontinent" (Brahmbhatt, 2016:102), changing "the geographic contour of the Swaminarayan *satsang*…and this catalyzed the transformation of BAPS from a regional Gujarat-based community into a transnational organization" (Kim, 2010:366). By 1995 BAPS had constructed its first *shikharbadh mandir* outside of India, in Neasden, London. BAPS congregations began to grow in North America in the 1970s, and are known today, among other reasons, for their *mandirs* and history of congregationalism across the globe. Unlike other Hindu organizations that have embraced congregationalism as a result of American and diasporic circumstances, congregationalism has played an integral role in the functionality and development of the entire Swaminarayan Sampradaya, and the BAPS branch (established in 1907) in particular, from its inception in India, over two centuries ago. While many Hindu communities have embraced congregationalism once in the diaspora, it is a central practice for BAPS at *mandirs* in India and in the diaspora alike. BAPS *mandirs* serve as public spaces for worship and weekly congregations, and also serve as

centers for religious celebrations, youth activities, and a number of humanitarian services take place.

More often than not, BAPS is a welcome presence in American communities, but there have been instances where *mandir* projects have been met with local resistance. Through a study of the dispute surrounding the construction of a BAPS *mandir* in Chino Hills, California, this paper will examine how secular power operates in the context of zoning laws and governmental decision-making.

Chronology of the Chino Hills Case Study

The BAPS community faced a particularly long and testing struggle in the construction of a *mandir* in the Southern California town of Chino Hills. BAPS initially had a small *mandir* in a repurposed building in Whittier, California.[1] As the local BAPS community continued to grow, it began to search for another site that would accommodate the growing membership.[2] In 1996, BAPS commenced a search for land on which to build a new *mandir* and cultural community center. After considering multiple parcels of land shown to them by city officials in 2000, BAPS leaders decided to purchase a 20-acre property in Chino Hills. BAPS envisioned creating a public space, in the form of a *mandir*, for worship and activities, and also anticipated that the future community complex would contribute to the local economy by drawing visitors to the town, increasing city revenue and tourism, and adding an appreciable representation of culture and religion to the community. Over the next two years, BAPS raised the required funds to purchase the selected land and finalized the transaction in May 2002.

Formal plans for an 80-foot high stone *mandir*, built in accordance with traditional Hindu architecture, and a connecting cultural complex were then submitted to the Chino Hills City Council. The City's Planning Commission Staff Report, dated June 17, 2003, addressed BAPS' plans and specified that the proposed *mandir* would have five intricately-carved stone spires, three of which would reach a height of 70 feet, with the other two reaching 50 feet in height. The Planning Commission Report also expressed the City's approval for BAPS' project and did not indicate any conflicts between the planned height and applicable zoning ordinances (*Planning Commission Staff Report, 2003*).

However, in July 2003, the City determined that its initial reading of the law governing the height of the structure had been incorrect. The City's Planning Commission was subsequently tasked with assessing the matter and finding a resolution, as the City Council would not approve a project that potentially conflicted with a developmental ordinance. Upon reviewing the height-related objection and

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[1] "Center Profile BAPS Chino Hills Hindu *Mandir* and Cultural Center (2005)."
[2] Ibid.

related ordinances, the Planning Commission suggested that the City Council ratify an amendment to the Development Code. This relatively commonplace measure would rectify the problem caused by the city officials' initial misinterpretation of the Code and would also prevent similar issues from arising in future developments. The executive summary of the Planning Commission's July 15, 2003 report proposed an amendment permitting the height of towers, steeples, or other similar architectural features on churches and church facilities to exceed the height limits of the underlying zone, up to a maximum of 80 feet. Under this amendment, the proposed BAPS *mandir* would be permitted to include appurtenances up to the amended 80 feet height limit (Planning Commission Staff Report, 2003).

Upon proposing the Code Amendment, the City began to receive letters from the public commenting on BAPS' proposed *mandir* and the perceived negative impact it would have on the city. On July 30, 2003, less than two weeks before the scheduled August hearing, BAPS received a call from the City Council, informing it that an anonymous individual had sent a three-page document to the Council, asserting that actual attendance figures at the proposed *mandir* would substantially exceed BAPS' submitted estimates. The letter expressed that the BAPS *mandir*, upon completion, would become a major tourist attraction that would draw large crowds akin to amusement parks and concerts. The *Los Angeles Times* (Joanna Corman, February 15, 2002) reported that the initial proposal submitted by BAPS had estimated that the *mandir* "would serve about 1,000 people on Sundays and 1,500 during monthly celebrations and holidays." When BAPS representatives met with city officials to discuss the allegations and to reiterate the validity of their initial project proposal, they learned that the anonymous document had purportedly been sent on behalf of BAPS itself, despite the fact that it was not signed by a BAPS authority nor even submitted on a BAPS letterhead. The City Council nonetheless considered the document to be authentic, and felt it was prudent to "not to take any chances" (Bhatt 2012, 3). BAPS was instructed to further substantiate the estimated attendance numbers they had submitted. To do so, BAPS conducted a complete traffic analysis and attendance study based on similar-scale BAPS *mandirs* in the Chicago suburb of Bartlett, Illinois and the Houston suburb of Stafford, Texas. In order to provide BAPS with sufficient time to conduct this study, the City Council postponed the previously scheduled August 2003 hearing.[3]

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[3] Based on the research conducted in Bartlett, BAPS reported, "The opening ceremony and related festivities for the Hindu temple and cultural center in Bartlett, Illinois were orderly and a grand success from a logistical perspective. Many of Bartlett's citizens took part, and those that chose not to visit went about their daily lives without any difficulties. Local media coverage of the actual opening ceremony and later events was very positive and no complaints from local citizens were reported. After the Chino Hills temple and cultural complex is approved and constructed, BAPS West may wish to seek the City's permission to hold a special opening ceremony. If so, the City can expect much the same as the Bartlett opening ceremonies –a professionally organized infrastructure, orderly groups of visitors, smooth-flowing roads, and no strain on police or emergency services." –BAPS Chino Hills *Courier Ad.*

While BAPS and Chino Hills officials worked to determine the credibility of the anonymous letter and to assess the validity of its assertions, word spread across the region that BAPS was proposing to build "the largest Hindu temple and cultural center in Southern California, an ornate structure with the kind of religious status held by the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove and the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in downtown Los Angeles" (*Los Angeles Times,* Martin Hugo October 4, 2004). The news of such a large project and rumors about the cancellation of the August hearing raised concerns among some Chino Hills residents, who became increasingly apprehensive as the project progressed.

The 1,600 letters submitted by local residents to the City Council reflected that public opinion on the controversy was equally divided— 809 letters expressed support of and 791 letters voiced opposition to the BAPS project (City Council Meeting, 2011). Generally, the letters in opposition to the project collectively expressed five principal reasons why the project should not be approved, namely: (1) it would bring traffic issues and an overwhelming volume of visitors to the city, (2) it would forever change city demographics, (3) it would destroy the rural setting of Chino Hills, (4) the architecture would not fit the city plan, and (5) the *mandir* was a special interest project that would benefit only 1% of Chino Hills residents (*i.e.*, 700 local BAPS members out of 70,000 city residents) (Keen, 2011, Scanned Letters).

Other residents were transparent in voicing concerns rooted in prejudice. One Chino Hills resident expressed his discomfort with the increased presence of a minority group in two separate letters to the City Council. His letter dated June 5, 2003 read, "Should this temple be allowed to be built, you are opening the door to Pandora's box. What will then happen is, for example, Chinese, Arabic, and other nationalities will want to build buildings in Chino Hills with THEIR third world architecture, and part of Chino Hills will look like a third world country" (The Pluralism Project webpage, 2005).

It thus appeared that BAPS' proposed project had worried community members on a variety of grounds, including considerations of religion, culture, architecture, traffic, and tourism.

Some Chino Hills residents felt that such a high-profile project should not be approved for a minority community, arguing that, "there are only 700 Hindus in the city of 70,000…this project is not in the best interests of the approximately 69,300 other residents. If anything, the project should be in direct proportion to the current Hindu population in the city" (Keen, 2011, Scanned Letters). The perspective that proportional representation should govern the size of a proposed project raises constitutional concerns regarding the freedom of religion and expression.

Other letters urged the City to "do the job you were elected to do and speak for the MAJORITY!" and stated, "We elect a city council to make decisions based on what the majority wants. That is the American/democratic way. What the Majority of the residents want is the only way to go" (Keen, 2011, Scanned Letters). At this point in the narrative of the BAPS *mandir* in Chino Hills, the City Council chose to look beyond the zoning codes and to consider the widely varying opinions of the local community that the project would ostensibly impact.

Whether the net effect of this project on the city would be positive or negative, however, remained to be seen at this point. In the realm of public opinion, the notions of religious freedom and equality could be trumped by other ideals and financial imperatives. For instance, some Chino Hills residents expressed, "If this temple is built, unfortunately, we will have to move" (Bhatt 2016:367). Arguably, the threat to leave the city by a considerable number of taxpayers prompted equal, if not greater, attention by city officials. The intense public controversy surrounding the BAPS project underscored the perceived need for the issue to be resolved in a democratic manner—in this case, through a series of public hearings that would give citizens the opportunity to voice their concerns and be heard by the local government.

BAPS attempted to assuage some of these concerns by disseminating information about the organization, its religious beliefs, its volunteer-driven and charitable donation-based activities, and the need in society for such Hindu *mandirs*. BAPS also completed the aforementioned traffic studies based on its *mandirs* in the Chicago suburb of Bartlett and the Houston suburb of Stafford; these studies suggested that concerns about traffic at the proposed Chino Hills *mandir* were empirically unfounded. Those in opposition to BAPS' project also took action on their end, including holding meetings, investigating BAPS and its *mandirs* nationwide, and organizing a letter and petition drive—in addition to continuing their vocal opposition to the project in a variety of community fora. Although not all of the opposition explicitly cited BAPS' Hindu beliefs as a "non-American" religion that needed to be restricted, concerns based on the *mandir* "not fitting into" the public vision of Chino Hills, or that BAPS members were too small a segment of the community to merit such a prominent structural presence, still presented challenges to the notions of religious freedom and equality.

Winnifred Fallers Sullivan has argued that it is impossible to ensure and protect the freedom of religion if religion itself cannot be coherently defined in the context of American law (Sullivan 2007:1). Under this perspective, one could suggest that many things are easily identifiable as either religious or not, but many other issues fall into a grey area where the line of distinction is no longer clear. In the Chino Hills *mandir* controversy however, the design of the proposed structure did not occupy such a grey area. It was entirely a religious issue. For BAPS, the structural design of the *mandir* itself was non-negotiable, because, as discussed shortly, it also

involved religious meaning. On the other hand, the local residents' observation that the BAPS *mandir* would be the first of its kind in the area, along with their objections that it would permanently change the demographics of the city, suggest that their concern about the city's "cultural landscape" was, more precisely, a xenophobic desire to preserve a certain *type* of culture.

The idea that a Hindu *mandir* would not "fit" into the cultural landscape of the existing community perhaps was a relative perception, and one that was somewhat mollified through BAPS' subsequent efforts to educate the community about the organization and its motivations. In contrast, the public call to reject the project because it represented only a small percentage of the population targeted the Hindu minority directly. How the government would navigate such an issue became of critical importance.

Following a year of campaigning by both supporters and opponents of the BAPS project, 1,200 people attended a City Council hearing on September 14, 2004 (*Inland Valley Daily Bulletin,* Edward Barrera, September 15, 2004). Two primary issues were on the City Council's agenda: (1) whether to grant approval to the proposed BAPS project to build a *mandir* and cultural center on the land purchased in 2002, and (2) whether to pass a Development Code Amendment, as suggested by the Planning Commission, allowing the *mandir*'s spires to reach 80 feet and exceed the existing 42-foot height limit in the non-institutional zone (*Inland Valley Daily Bulletin,* Edward Barrera, September 15, 2004).

BAPS was optimistic about the outcome of the hearing because, although the project had attracted critics, many local residents believed the project should move forward. For instance, some residents had stated, "You have to be open minded to see what they have to offer." Chino Hills Mayor Gary Larson, who opened the public hearing, stated to the City Council that BAPS "did everything we asked them to do. They were accommodating the whole way through." He later stated, "I think too many emotions got involved, and I think the problem you have is the NIMBY ('Not in My Backyard') problem" (*Inland Valley Daily Bulletin,* Edward Barrera, September 15, 2004). Lawrence Sager, in discussing the free exercise of culture and its extension to the free exercise of religion, suggests that, "When we make judgments about practices within these cultural subgroups we often do so in ignorance of the good reasons persons within those groups have for pursuing those practices, because we see them in isolation, out of their rich, complex, and largely alien context. We thus condemn, regulate, and even punish that which we do not understand and hence fail to grasp the value of" (Sager, 2000:197).

The public hearing comprised many locally prominent individuals, including Carol Herrera, Mayor Pro Tem in neighboring Diamond Bar, and Pete McCue, Chair of the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors, all of whom spoke in support of the project based on their previous positive experiences with BAPS. Most of the points raised

by the opposition were similar to the sentiments previously expressed in letters, website postings, public forums, and media articles. Some objections voiced at the hearing asserted that the project would turn Chino Hills into a "Third World city" and a "haven for terrorists."[4]

Following the public comments, Chino Hills City Council members offered their own thoughts. Although the concerns about an influx in traffic had been diffused by the results of a traffic study, Council members remained reluctant to accommodate the planned height of the *mandir*'s spires. When BAPS representatives were asked if they would agree to decrease the height of the spires, they explained that because the *mandir*'s proportions had been designed in accordance with sacred texts of Hindu architecture, while also drawing on the surrounding natural beauty of Chino Hills, a compromise on height would require an entirely modified project, which would negate the religious elements of BAPS' design. The design of BAPS *mandirs* is rooted in the *Nagara* tradition, which is predominant in north Indian temple architecture (Hardy, 2016:274). In particular, these designs have largely been "the work of the Sompura community of traditional architectural practitioners from Gujarat," and "the hereditary calling and status of the Sompuras has been key to ensuring that the new buildings are true to the Shastra—that is, to Vastu Shastra, the ancient and sacred science of architecture" (Hardy, 2016:274). The components of the *mandir's* design are intended to symbolize the personified form of the Divine, and "by employing their rhythms, a metrical reconstitution is effected of the limited human personality" (Kramrisch, 1958:224). The architectural design of Swaminarayan *mandirs* are unique in their characteristics, which include: (1) the triple shrine-sanctum, which is located in the center of the structure and "is conceived to suit the ritualistic worship of three distinct forms of a deity;" (2) the *sabha mandapa* or assembly pavilion, which is enlarged and extended with a path for circumambulations around the triple shrines, allowing for *darshan* or ritual viewing of the deities; and (3) the space created for devotees to have *darshan* of the deities, emphasizing personal development. "The key distinction in the Swaminarayan temple building tradition then is the spatial positioning and architectural form of the triple shrine or garbha gruha" (Vasavada, 2016:265). As a result, the BAPS *mandir's* planned proportions and height were deliberately designed and derived from longstanding religious principles.

The City Council voted 4-1 to approve certain other elements of BAPS's plan, including granting a conditional use permit, but rejected the proposed Code Amendment to the zoning law regulating height restrictions. Paresh Patel, BAPS Director of Development and a leader of the Chino Hills *mandir* project, stated that

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[4] "Opposition to Places of Worship & Religious Practices in the U.S. Fact Sheet." Center for Interreligious Understanding, n.d. https://www.tanenbaum.org/sites/default/files/P51%20Resources%20-%20Opposition%20to%20Places%20of%20Worship_0.pdf.

the denial was in fact a surprise since the project had proposed the same design from the beginning of the approval and public comment process. Patel said, "[The proposed height] was not a surprise to the city, staff, planning commission or the public" prior to the September 2004 hearing. For BAPS, it was back to the drawing board.

Following the September 2004 hearing, BAPS leaders deliberated for months and ultimately decided not to pursue legal action but continued pressing for the project's approval.   This decision was made following guidance from Pramukh Swami Maharaj, the fifth spiritual successor of Swaminarayan and guru of BAPS from 1971-2016, who advised that the real concern was not with the city or its residents themselves, but rather with the pervasive misconceptions about what BAPS was, why it was proposing the *mandir* project, what its intentions were, as well as the absence of public understanding about how the project would benefit not only Hindus, but the community at large (*Inland Valley Daily Bulletin,* Edward Barrera, September 15, 2004).

BAPS then decided to commence fundraising and construction on the already-approved cultural center, for which the 42-foot height limit was not an issue. Over the next two years, BAPS raised funds to begin the project and, in parallel, conducted research on affordable construction methods that would still ensure that the structure was earthquake-resistant. By 2006, construction of the cultural complex, which included an assembly hall, reception center, classrooms, a gymnasium, a kitchen, and a rectory, began. After three years of research, fundraising, and construction, the cultural complex was opened to the public in the summer of 2009. As part of BAPS' campaign to be environmentally friendly, the cultural complex included solar carports that provided 100% of the complex's energy needs. These solar panels, located on top of the parking structures, currently provide 579.6 kilowatts of power, at the time making BAPS one of the leading producers of solar electricity in the state.[5]

As BAPS worked to build a cultural complex within the mandated 42-foot height restriction, just two blocks down the same highway, and visible from the *mandir* property, a crane was working to erect a 100-foot-tall sign for a shopping center that was under construction. The inconsistencies were striking. On one hand, the *mandir*'s proposed architectural features, including spires and flagpoles rising up to 80-feet high, were considered by some residents not to fit the city plan and to risk destroying the natural character of the community. On the other hand, the 100-foot tall sign for a new shopping mall was welcomed by the city as its very own landmark.[6] The issue of the shopping mall sign gained public notoriety amongst the

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[5] Up on the Roof: Game Changes for the Photovoltaic Power Generation. *Champion Newspaper*. 04 30, 2011.

[6] The Shoppes at Chino Hills: Leaving a Mark. *Inland Valley Daily Bulletin*. 05 14, 2008.

community supporters of BAPS, in relation to BAPS' efforts to raise awareness in the community about the benefits of the *mandir* project.

Although frustrated at this turn of events, the BAPS community persisted in its efforts. After inaugurating the new cultural complex at the end of 2009, members emphasized the existing community service efforts in the form of public health fairs, bone marrow drives, blood donation drives, recycling programs, and walkathons to support various local charitable causes. The congregation also organized a series of "open houses," which offered members of the community information about BAPS and tours of the facility and construction site, in an effort provide clarity and remove any misunderstanding about BAPS and the proposed *mandir*.

In 2011, BAPS decided to, once again, propose an amendment to the city's Development Code to permit the construction of the *mandir* with external architectural features reaching up to 80 feet high. The City Council scheduled a public hearing for August 9, 2011, in advance of which it had received over 400 letters regarding the issue. Unlike the events in 2004, however, of the 400 letters, only 12 were written in opposition to the project.[7] This time around, many letters in favor of the project were submitted by non-BAPS members of the Chino Hills community directly to media outlets. For instance, one local resident wrote, "Certainly the marble temple will provide a more pleasant view than the large shopping center signs that already line the freeway corridor…By allowing the spires, Chino Hills can enhance the city's charm and beauty while embracing cultural diversity, and all of us will benefit" ("Public Forum" Champion Newspaper, July 16, 2011). Other local residents wrote about the contribution the *mandir* would make to the neighborhood.[8]

In renewing its request for an amendment to the Development Code, BAPS highlighted that "the main spire tapers to two inches at its highest point. The two medium-sized spires and two smaller-sized spires rise to within 5 to 10 feet of the tallest spire…only 6 percent of the temple will exceed the 42-foot limit" (*Champion Newspaper,* Marianne Napoles, August 12, 2011). At the City Council hearing on August 9, 2011, 33 individuals spoke in support of the project and only one individual spoke against it. In the interest of time, another 170 supporters waived

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[7] Video- Chino Hills City Council Regular Meeting: Tuesday, August 9, 2011. [Online] http://chinohills.granicus.com/MediaPlayer.php?view_id=2&clip_id=475.

[8] Benjamin Sanchez, a resident of the Rancho Monte Vista Mobile Home Park across the road from the BAPS mandir, wrote, "The temple and cultural center [would be] a wonderful addition to our neighborhood, and since [the cultural center] opened, I have seen less crime in our area and seen how the BAPS center has made our neighborhood look and feel better…I do not feel that the small part of the temple over 42 feet will block my view…We also know that traffic has not been and will not be an issue. We have taken the time to visit BAPS and learn about the project, and we have made a decision to support BAPS.

their right to speak.[9] Following the public comments portion of the hearing, City Council Members shared their own views. Council Member Kruger stated that he had initially wondered whether BAPS was engaging in humanitarian services simply to garner support for the Chino Hills project, but had called the mayors of Stafford, Texas and Bartlett, Illinois, where BAPS had opened similar *mandirs* in 2004, and confirmed that the BAPS congregations there were also engaged in longstanding community service efforts. After members of the City Council noted that BAPS had done a commendable job integrating into the community, removing misunderstandings, and ultimately changing opinions, the 3.5-hour public hearing ended with a unanimous vote, 5-0, in favor of the Code Amendment, allowing the BAPS *mandir* to be built up to 78 feet high.[10]

After the August 2011 hearing, the newly passed amendment read, in part: "Religious facilities within a non-institutional zone and with more than 50 percent of its site adjacent to a business park, industrial or commercial zone may be permitted heights up to a maximum of 80 feet by towers, steeples, or similar features."[11]

The decision by the City Council to reverse course from its initial decision suggests that, at the beginning of the initial process, a desire to represent the views of the vocal majority trumped a commitment to religious freedom. BAPS' proposed project remained the same throughout the years; it is notable that the City Council eventually granted approval for the project *via* an amendment to the same ordinance it had initially relied upon to reject the same proposal.

Two factors occurred in the interim that changed the City Council's approach: first, BAPS made conscious efforts to remove misunderstandings about Hinduism and the organization itself. Second, a commercial billboard exceeding the 42-foot height limit was approved and installed nearby and became a symbol of the inconsistent treatment of BAPS. With the sign's approval by the City Council, the claim that views of the city would be obstructed by BAPS' proposed *mandir* design were clearly untenable. With this precedent and in light of BAPS' growing support from the community, the City Council was no longer in a position to again refuse BAPS' proposal.

This case study serves to illustrate one type of challenge faced by the diasporas of South Asian religious groups in their efforts to build spiritually and aesthetically traditional places of worship and centers of community. As discussed above, local residents in Chino Hills initially asserted that certain architectural elements of the proposed structure would disrupt the city's natural beauty. More critically, they

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[9] Video- Chino Hills City Council Regular Meeting: Tuesday, August 9, 2011. [Online] http://chinohills.granicus.com/MediaPlayer.php?view_id=2&clip_id=475.
[10] Video- Chino Hills City Council Regular Meeting: Tuesday, August 9, 2011. [Online] http://chinohills.granicus.com/MediaPlayer.php?view_id=2&clip_id=475.
[11] Ibid.

suggested that the very existence of the *mandir* would prompt unwelcome changes to the city's religious and demographic makeup. These residents opposed what they perceived to be a bold introduction into the community of an unfamiliar religion with visible architectural features that would become associated with their community, along with the associated influx of individuals and activities unfamiliar to them. After years of facing these obstacles, the BAPS community in Chino Hills was able to complete the proposed *mandir*. With a new support from the local community, the *mandir* construction was completed and open to the public by December 2012.

Are Zoning Laws a Sufficient Tool for Secular Democracy?

The use of zoning laws as a tool of secular democracy to mediate issues surrounding the construction of religious places of worship, such the BAPS *mandir* in Chino Hills, is effective in theory, but as demonstrated through the chronology of this controversy, the relative weight of the notion of religious freedom fluctuates in circumstances in which there is local public opposition. First Amendment protections of religious freedom aim to ensure that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or preventing the free exercise thereof" (U.S. Constitution, Amendment 1), so long as a given expression of religion does not inflict harm unto others or threaten public safety.[12] Although the BAPS *mandir* project did not pose any such concerns, it was still denied approval based on zoning ordinances, despite the fact that these ordinances had regularly been amended, as initially recommended by the City, or not enforced in order to accommodate other objectives.

The Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act of 2000 (RLUIPA)[13] is a federal statute intended to "protect individuals, houses of worship, and other religious institutions from discrimination in zoning and landmarking laws" (Department of Justice, RLUIPA). Through the RLUIPA, the federal government has recognized that local zoning codes and landmarking laws often allow for the unlawful exclusion of religious assemblies in places and spaces where secular assemblies would otherwise be permitted. As such, the RLUIP prohibits the use of zoning and landmarking laws that "(1) treat churches or other religious assemblies or institutions on less than equal terms with nonreligious assemblies or institutions; (2) discriminate against any assemblies or institutions on the basis of religion or religious denomination; (3) totally exclude religious assemblies from a jurisdiction; or (4) unreasonably limit religious assemblies, institutions, or structures within a jurisdiction" (Department of Justice, RLUIPA). The RLUIPA further recognizes that

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[12] Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts, *First Amendment and Religion*, available at http://www.uscourts.gov/educational-resources/educational-activities/first-amendment-and-religion
[13] 42 U.S.C. § 2000cc *et seq*. https://www.justice.gov/crt/religious-land-use-and-institutionalized-persons-act

local and state governments' inherent discretion in applying their zoning laws, and the resulting potential for arbitrary application of zoning laws, allows for an unequal impact on minority and minoritized groups.

Congress' enactment of the RLUIPA demonstrates that the issue underlying the Chino Hills *mandir* dispute is by no means an isolated case. As recently as December 2016, the Department of Justice sent a letter to state, county, and municipal officials across the U.S., highlighting the obligation of local officials to comply with the provisions of the RLUIPA. This letter explained that "sixteen years after RLUIPA's enactment, far too many people and communities remain unaware of the law, or do not fully understand the scope of its provisions…Participants also reported that houses of worship, particularly those from less familiar religious traditions, often face unlawful barriers in the zoning and building process" (Gupta, 2016:2).

It is beyond to the scope of this article to assess whether the Chino Hills City Council's initial rejection of BAPS' request for an amendment to the height-related zoning ordinance would have implicated the RLUIPA—although, on its face, BAPS would appear to have had a credible RLUIPA claim against the City Council. On one hand, BAPS was still able to obtain a conditional use permit, build a cultural center, and engage in religious and cultural activities. On the other hand, the City Council's initial denial of the proposed amendment to the height-related zoning ordinance, following prejudiced local sentiments, arguably would have prevented BAPS from building a place of worship in accordance with longstanding religious principles. Thus, although the RLUIPA is a useful tool in protecting religious groups from the discriminatory application of local zoning laws, it may not be a panacea in this regard. The potential for local governments' zoning decisions to discriminatorily impact minority religious groups thus remains an issue of concern today.

As noted in the narrative of the Chino Hills case, one of the concerns raised by the local community members was with regard to proportional representation. These concerns expressed a belief that the appropriate democratic process for deciding the *mandir*'s fate would allow the majority vote to prevail. Such an approach, however, can be problematic.   Although there is inherent value in the democratic process, the majority consensus may not always produce the most beneficial outcomes for the city and may not even be lawful. Indeed, the protection of minority rights from the "tyranny of the majority" is a foundational American value, enshrined in the Bill of Rights that should guide all levels of governmental decision-making. Instead, the "tyranny of the majority" played a key role in the Chino Hills *mandir* dispute, in that the majority of the community was, in effect, placing their parochial and biased beliefs above the rights and interests of the minority group, in this case BAPS. Had the tyranny of the majority prevailed, BAPS' only practical recourse would have been potentially costly legal action, given that the first half of the project (the cultural center) had already been completed. Yet even if BAPS prevailed in a lawsuit, it would have risked entrenching itself in an adversarial position relative to the local

community. Further, relocating and restarting the project from scratch would have been prohibitively costly, notwithstanding the inability of BAPS to construct a place of worship in accordance with Hindu architectural principles.

BAPS members anticipated that the *mandir* and cultural complex would in fact enrich their own faith community as well as the greater Chino Hills community; that the *mandir* would increase city revenue and, most importantly, that it would provide a religious space for Hindus and an appreciable cultural resource for the Chino Hills community as a whole. Having taken the time to learn about the *mandir* project and understand it better, local community members who were initially opposed to the *mandir*'s construction eventually offered overwhelming support.

While part of the duty of elected officials is to represent the needs and opinions of their constituents, an additional responsibility includes making decisions, even ones that are not always popular, but do uphold American ideals enshrined in the constitution that protects minority rights in the face of the majority tyranny. Arguably, the City Council's initial vote to prevent the Chino Hills BAPS *mandir* from being constructed as planned, if influenced by the prejudiced sentiments of the local majority, failed to satisfy this responsibility.   The twelve-year battle that ensued offers a reflection of how secularism operates to regulate religion and exemplified many of the challenges that accompany fulfilling the secular ideal in practice.

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Book Review

Jacobsen, Knut A. ed. (2016) *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary India*. Routledge. Pp.522. ISBN: 9781138313750, 1138313750.

Knut A. Jacobsen has assembled a fascinating volume in the *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary India*, demonstrating the complexities and diversity present in contemporary India post economic reforms of the 1980s and 1990s. The essays offer significant insight into the cultural and social transformation in Indian society, politics, and culture integral to our understanding of India in the twenty-first century. The collection of thirty-two essays is divided into five parts.

Part 1, Foundations, includes six chapters that discuss the fundamental issues of India as a society and nation-state. Pippa Virdee's first chapter deals with the issues of partition between India and Pakistan and as a result shared Punjabi culture and identity was divided and still is based on religion. In chapter two, Subrata Kumar Mitra discusses the survival of democracy in India and reasons that India's successful functioning of democracy depends on three aspects: elections and political campaigns, election re-enforcing institutional arrangements, and asymmetric but cooperative federalism. Ananth Padmanabhan in chapter three examines three aspects of the Constitution and the Supreme Court's consideration and contends that on the one hand the Supreme Court succeeds in ensuring individual freedom, self-development, and sustainable growth into constitutional conversation, and on the other hand, national unity and the self-preservation of the Constitution have emerged as important normative concerns for the Supreme Court. In chapter four, Kunal Sen analyses the economic foundation of India and argues that Indian economy has shown considerable growth and political and economic institutions have played significant role. Chapter five, deals with education in India, especially primary education, as Vimala Ramachandran demonstrates that the lack of quality in primary education remains a threat to Indian democracy and offers suggestions to remedy this situation as children are educated to realize their right to be taught and learn in a non-discriminatory environment. In chapter six, Rajeswari Raina argues that the state and it's ideological and functional allies have imposed its own understanding of agricultural development and prevented the rich diversity and potential of Indian farming communities.

Part II, India and the World, consists of six chapters. In chapter seven, Rajat Ganguly analyzes issue of security and wellbeing focusing on ethnic conflicts, national threats caused by Maoist insurgency, and foreign policy, and maintains that India has moved from policy of 'non-alignment' to 'poly-alignment' (131). Manjeet Pardesi in chapter eight examines Indian military relations with other South Asian countries and rest of Asia, and claims that India is in the process of developing into a great power in Asia and the balancing of power politics, but not so much as a regional power in South Asia. In chapter nine, Emma Mawdsley discusses India to

be challenging Western norms and modalities contending that the Indian development discourse employs language of mutual respect as against the patronizing language of the Western development. Brij Lal and Knut Jacobsen in chapter ten analyze the role of the Indian diasporas and the place of religions and diversity in the Indian diasporas and emphasize that the Indian diaspora is extremely diverse and plural and religion remains central in the preservation of personal identity, and maintaining of identities and traditions. Lal and Jacobsen point an important aspect that the Dalits do not want to associate with the Indian diaspora as a means of escaping the Indian environment and creating their own different religious identity. In chapter eleven, Mark Singleton discusses the transnational and transcultural flows that shaped the development of Yoga in contemporary India and argues that the history of borrowing, blending, and exchanges have mutated Yoga, and to understand Yoga in its modern manifestation it is not sufficient to identify Yoga in its supposed origins in tradition. In chapter twelve, Maya Warrier examines the changes undergone in Ayurveda in modern times and asserts that mainstream Ayurveda has blended the theories and practices of biomedicine and that its assimilation within the framework of Western spirituality diverges it's from its biomedicalised and nationalistic manifestation (197).

Part III, Society, Class, Caste, and Gender, consists of eight chapters. Diego Maiorano investigates the complex dynamics that prompted Indian government to liberalize its economy and the consequences of these reforms and argues that India's economic reforms sheds light on the enduring power of the elite groups in Indian politics. In chapter fourteen, Nandini Gooptu explores the transformation post economic liberalization and claims that two contradictory trends describe the changing Indian city: one, exclusive providing an opportunity for middle- and upper-class aspirations in private spaces, and two, inclusive in top-down participatory governance though with political and social divisions. Leela Fernandes in chapter fifteen illustrates that some of the central trends in contemporary India have been shaped by the politics of the middle classes resonating with essays in Part V of this book. In chapter sixteen, Surinder Jodhka argues that despite considerable changes in social and economic life, caste continues to overlap with newer forms of inequalities and survives as a value ranking people on the basis of honor and humiliation. William Gould in chapter seventeen demonstrates that anti-corruption movements happen when the political system is unable to control certain kinds of capital accumulation and suggests that perceiving corruption as an alternative political economy that maintains its own form of social and administrative stability and when this stability is threatened, then anti-corruption protest happen (257). In chapter eighteen, Harald Tambs-Lyche and Nikita Sud shed light on the pattern of economic liberalism and illiberal politics inspired by Hindutva in Gujarat which promotes social inequality and limits minority rights to become an all-India model. Mallirika Roy in chapter nineteen explores the complexity in discourses of family and marriage in India revisiting contested fields of intimacy and argues that subversion remains significant in family and marriage in contemporary India. In chapter twenty,

Uday Chandra examines Adivasi community and contends Adivasis to be subaltern individuals and communities grappling with modernity.

Part IV, Religion and Diversity, consists of eight chapters that describes diversity as a main characteristic of religions of India. Gerald Larson, in chapter twenty-one, argues that religious and cultural diversity can be observed in the way we understand 'history' and 'myth' based on his examination from second millennium BCE. Larson asserts that the reversal of history into myth promotes the idea of the present and future becoming the past. In chapter twenty-two, Vasudha Narayanan claims that in Hinduism spirituality is expressed in materiality, and that matter is fluid. Knut Jacobsen in chapter twenty-three discusses how religious and economic institutions promote the growth of pilgrims by connecting mythology with geography. While the previous two chapters of this section discuss materiality and space, the subsequent chapters provide insight into exclusionary tendency within some religious traditions. In chapter twenty-four, Eleanor Zelliot presents Ambedkar's Navayana Buddhism and highlights Buddhist conversion in India in the larger picture of Buddhism. And in chapter twenty-five, Ronki Ram examines the Ad Dharma and Ravidassia traditions of Punjab and explains Ravidassia centers to be instrumental in shaping unique Dalit identity in contemporary Punjab distinct from the other religious traditions of the region. R. Santosh in chapter twenty-six highlights the error of considering Muslim community as a homogenous entity and explores the diversity among Muslims in India. In chapter twenty-seven, Marika Vicziany investigates religious violence between Hindus and Muslims and argues that Hindu nationalism stems from threats to Hindu demographic, cultural, and political dominance and the reason for violence is the under-representation of Indian Muslims in administrative and other institutions of India. John C. B. Webster in chapter twenty-eight sheds light on the diversity among Christians and points that a significant number of Christians are from the low caste and tribal communities and as a minority group have to face opposition from the Hindu nationalists.

Part V, Cultural Change and Innovations, includes four chapters. Nandita Ghosh in chapter twenty-nine discusses gendered body and violence against women arguing for the centrality of women's bodies to any understanding of unequal gender relations (430) and how dominant narratives can be problematized opening new possibilities in India. In chapter thirty, Michiel Bass examines new images of Indian male body, which focus on muscles and masculinity and the idea of 'ideal' male body. Bass argues that the male body provides a space for construction of meaning and the visibility of 'ideal' male body important in the formation of middle-class. Michaël Bruckert in chapter thirty-one explains the changing food habits in contemporary India within the discourses and practices of middle-class demonstrating transformation and paving way for new patterns of social mobility and freedom from ethnic, caste, and religious regulations (468). In the last chapter of the book, Brigitte Sebastia explores Siddha medical knowledge used to treat diabetes and maintains that while college-trained Siddha practitioners are trained in

biomedical discipline and emerging diseases, traditional Siddha practitioners have to employ innovative methods to treat emerging diseases that was rare in the past.

Jacobsen's edited volume succeeds in providing a broad overview of some of the key issues that shape contemporary India from different academic perspectives, religious, social, historical, political, and anthropological. The multidisciplinary aspect of the book makes it appealing to those generalist as well as specialist interested in understanding India post economic reforms of 1980s and 1990s.

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Book Review

Rudert, Angela. (2017) *Shakti's New Voice: Guru Devotion in a Woman-Led Spiritual Movement*. Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Lexington Books. Pp. 217. ISBN: 978 – 1- 4985 – 4754- 3. Hardcover.

For most well thought out works, the title is an appropriate foretaste and indicator of the heuristic framing or lens that the writer confers to the reader. This is no less true for this book. By choosing to include the seemingly unassuming descriptor '*new'* that precedes the words 'Shakti's voice', Angela Rudert immediately sets up for us, a hermeneutical framing of Anandmurti Gurumaa as a new incarnation of sorts, and as a differently positioned, and responsive Shakti or Feminine Divine.

Originally conceived of as a doctoral dissertation at the disciplinary juncture of history of religions and anthropology, the book manages to retain the apposite scholarly rigour demanded of a dissertation, while donning the relaxed and casual armchair readability expected by wider audiences.

The author devotes substantial attention to the task of constructing for the reader, an intimate snapshot of her methodological entrée into the field and the research(er) ethics incumbent in doing such 'close up' qualitative work. The subsequent chapters organically unfold thematised strands of critique around how Anandmurti Gurumaa comes to be 'installed' and accepted as an enlightened being and traditional Master/Teacher within a transnational diasporic context, as well as within an intercultural and technologically accessible idiom.

There is much in this book that both a lay audience as well students and scholars of religion would enjoy. As an anthropologist, this reader was appreciative of the sustained critical and phenomenological discussion of *ethnography*, *ethnographer* and *ethnographic gaze* that the author sets out to authentically engage with. While I am not entirely convinced that the tensions are fully resolved, the continuous scholarly vigilance and attentiveness on the part of the author is to be appreciated. And it may well be that the tensions around her ethnographic positioning as 'fuzzy' insider/outsider or seeker/scholar, are not realistically meant to be fully resolved. What it does bring up to the gaze is the imbricated complexities that are entangled when doing this kind of immersive ethnographic work, where the boundaries between emic and etic can fluidly shift and change. While Rudert does not offer a penetrative discussion of the process of 'troubling' such (imagined?) ethnographic positionalities, her reflexive descriptions of her encounters with both Anandmurti Gurumaa, as well as with the devotees of Gurumaa, and her own adopted embodied participant observation approach, offer empirical reference points for the reader to glimpse this tension. In so doing she offers aspects of both Geerztian 'thick description' as well as an Abu-Lughodian 'ethnography of the particular', which she comes to further coin as 'theological ethnography'.

While at first glance it may appear decidedly uneasy to read work where the scholar/author admits to being herself a 'seeker' (although not necessarily a

devotee or follower of Gurumaa herself), this position is perhaps not completely dissimilar to that of a researcher who undertakes sustained immersive ethnographic work within any community.

Indeed that kind of anthropological vis-à-vis ethnographic work demands the assembling of scaffolds of trust and relationships, as well as an authentic degree of reciprocity between researcher and the community being researched. Notwithstanding this (self-confessed theological) subtext, Rudert demonstrates adroit understanding of the layered and heterogeneous Indic and pan South Asian religious (and spiritual) landscape in her ensuing critical discussion of the tradition of guru-hood and so called 'new age' gurus like Anandmurti Gurumaa, who openly traverse across the plural traditions of Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism and Hinduism as teachers and masters. Again her discussions nimbly 'trouble' and compel us to perhaps rethink how *useful* reified scholarly labeling and classifications are to the actual adherents who move seamlessly through what they see as synonymous frames of reference in their bid for spiritual enlightenment.

For this reader, the inherent and rather obvious gendered motifs of female-renunciate-guru was of immediate interest. It was the Indian scholar Rajeswari Sunder who provocatively titled her (1998) essay "Is the Hindu Goddess a Feminist?" In a similar vein, one can ask, is the female renunciate-guru a feminist? The simple, yet far from straightforward answer, deftly captured by Rudert, is, yes *and* no. As Rudert shows, Anandmurti Gurumaa works in an activism context and *is* concerned with girl and women's social empowerment. However, as Rudert documents in her one-on-one interviews with the guru, this is not Gurumaa's primary work, which is rather to facilitate the devotees' (male and female) spiritual enlightenment.

The social anthropologist Meena Khandelwal (2004) points out that Brahmanic orthodoxy reveals its misogynous tendencies by (attempting to) restrict renunciation to upper-caste Brahman men. Thus renunciation and womanhood, semiotically and experientially, are meant to denote mutually exclusive categories. The relatively fewer female gurus that one encounters in historical records and contemporary empirical studies offer a glimpse into what may be construed as a level of rupturing of a male divine teacher tradition that is otherwise theologically sacralised for the male. Women are not overtly tabooed from being renunciate teachers or spiritual leaders in the Hindu tradition. Yet their relative numerical absence reveals religious mechanisms that operate to pathologise their presence *outside* of such a spiritual leadership habitus.

Anandmurti Gurumaa however, is part of a group of female gurus who claim to have answered an inner calling. This calling sees them turn their backs on and renounce the prescribed normative roles for Indian women, to look deeply inward, and 'attain realization'. Many, like Anandmurti Gurumaa, thereafter, come to be spontaneously recognized by spiritual seekers, and in turn begin to naturally enact the role of Teacher/Master. Fortunately, this role of Teacher and Master is not reductively made synonymous to that of Mother, by the author.

Angela Rudert manages to capture the *persona* of Anandmurti Gurumaa as female, yet even as Anandmurti Gurumaa herself makes clear in the context of how she is visually discerned, it is not so much a question of *male guru* or *female guru*, but that the guru teaching, is (in this instance), being manifested by a body that happens to be female. Gurumaa is noted as self-referring as 'this body'. Likewise, while many (female) devotees shared that having a female guru made their multiple visits or long stays at the ashram, logistically easier to negotiate with the wider family, Gurumaa's discernable female-hood was not a sustained point of note. The devotees did not labour the point of Gurumaa as Mother, but rather that of Realized Teacher. Most devotees appeared to have moved past this visual moniker in their understanding of a gender-less Atman or Self that they saw in the form of Anandmurti Gurumaa. To the author's credit, the maternal persona of Anandmurti Gurumaa, which is often the easier 'fall back' reductive spiritual rhetoric when studying a female saint or guru, is not something that the author draws on.

Rudert points out that Anandmurti Gurumaa, as the transnational and technologically savvy guru, has successfully crafted herself to be reachable to wider networks of audiences by opting for the more accessible and global Hindi (over Sanskrit) as her language of communication/transmission. One adds that like the guru she has studied, the author has likewise successfully moved her work beyond the purely academic domain by crafting her ethnography and critical discussion in a way that it is accessible and has appeal to a wider audience pool of lay and scholar alike.

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Book Review

Caleb Simmons, Moumita Sen, & Hillary Rodrigues, eds. (2018) *Nine Nights of the Goddess: The Navarātri Festival of South Asia*. Albany: State University of New York Press. Pp. xiii + 359. Price: $ 85.00 (Hardcover).

The anthology titled *Nine Nights of the Goddess: The Navarātri Festival of South Asia* is an anthropological-sociological, that is partly social-scientific and partly theological, analysis. The fifteen densely and expertly written accounts of this popular pan-Indian as well as Nepalese ritual of the Great Goddess [*Devī*], the anthropomorphic representation of the cosmic energy, the redoubtable *Śakti* under such popular names as Cāmuṇḍā, Kālī, or Durgā (see more nomenclature of this deity in ch. 2, pp. 54-55), provide a comprehensive rendition of the mythological lurid lore of the nine nights of battle between a warrior *devī* representing all that is beneficent, munificent, and magnificent and a powerful shape-shifting titan [*asura*] in the guise of a gigantic buffalo [*mahiṣa*], who had been terrorizing the gods after having conquered their habitation, *Svargaloka* [Heaven] and taken over the rights and rules of the incumbent *Devarāja* (Divine King) Indra.

However, though Durgā's exploits as *Mahiṣamardinī* or the slayer of the buffalo demon forms the narrative of the Durgā *pūjā*, the *Navarātri* festival highlights the epic story of the legendary prince of Ayodhyā Rāma's long struggle against Rāvaṇa, the puissant prince of Laṅkā (present day Sri Lanka), who had abducted his wife Sītā. Unable to overcome his overmighty adversary, Rāma sought succor from the warrior Goddess and, fortified with her boons, killed the royal abductor. This narrative of Rāma's Durgā *puja*, known otherwise *Akālbodhan* [unseasonal invocation] as it was performed by the exiled prince of Ayodhyā due to the exigencies of the moment in the *Śuklapakṣa* [the fortnight of the waxing moon] of the lunar month of Āśvin, is derived from the vernacular traditions of Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* such as the Bengali *Rāmāyaṇa* by Kṛttivāsa Ojha (1381-1461) of Śāntipur (in present day West Bengal).

Presumably predating the Rāma-Rāvaṇa episode, King Suratha, in tandem with a merchant [*vaiśya*] named Samādhi, had worshipped Mahāmāyā (Durgā), the Divine Mother in the Spring season of Vasanta (*Primavera*) and this festival (Vāsantī Pūjā) is held in Eastern India, especially Bengal, though less intense and popular than the *Akālbodhan*.   However, both versions of the *Durgāpūjā* are of ten-day duration, the actual *pūjā* commemorating the *Devī's* battle with the buffalo demon [*Mahiṣāsura*] on the tenth day [*daśamī*] as well as Rāma's over Rāvaṇa.

The generally recognized sources of the *Navarātri*, aka *Durgāpūjā* are: the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* (550 CE), especially chapters 81-93 of the total 137 chapters,

titled variously *Devī Māhātmya* but also known as *Durgāsaptaśatī* or [Seven hundred verses in praise of Durgā] and *Caṇḍīpāṭha*; the *Devī Purāṇa* (*c.* 6th-9th centuries); the *Kālikā Purāṇa* (*c.* 10th-12th centuries); and the *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (*c.* 11th–12th centuries); *Durgāpūjātattva* [Text of Durgā worship], aka *Durgotsavatattva* [Information on Durgāfest], containing some material from and earlier source *Bṛhannandikeśvara* now lost) by Raghunandana Miśra (*c.* 16th century). Additionally, there some ritual treatises and traditional narrativized and prescriptions in Sanskrit and in South Asian vernaculars.

This anthology's sixteen chapters are arranged in four themes: Navarātri in the Court, Navarātri on Display, Navarātri Inside, and Navarātri at Home. The geographical spread of the contributors' research includes Kathmandu, Nepal (1), Mysore (1), Odisha (1), Kolkata (1), Mumbai (1), Benares (3) Kanchiuram (2), MaduraI (1), Chennai (1), Karnataka-Tamil Nadu-Andhra-Kerala (1), and Himachal Pradesh (1). Some chapters present interesting information on the features of *Navarātri* festival that shows some secular (that is, non-religious and non-scriptural) motivations and modalities of Durgā Pūjā, especially chapters 5 and 6, by Moumita Sen, Xenia Zeiler, and chapter 7 by Silje Lyngar Einarson, discussing the tussle between the twin Navarātri festivals of Benares: the *Rāmlīlā* [Rāma's Exploits and Righteous Regime] and the public festive worship of Durgā, the former popular with the traditional elites—nobles and Brahmins—since the nineteenth century but increasingly losing out in popularity to the latter organized by the majority of caste-heterogeneous collectives.

Several studies probe the ur-texts of the Navarātri/Durgā Pūjā celebration to discern its link with royalty and thus the divine power defeating the power of the devil and the demon (chapter 1 by Raj Balkaran, chapter 2 by Astrid Zotter, chapter 3 by Caleb Simmons, chapter 4 by Uwe Skoda, and chapter 14 by Vasudha Narayanan). Some contributors to this volume examine the Navarātri festival in public ("there") and domestic ("here"). Though admittedly, the worship of Durga, particularly in Bengal, originated among the high and mighty of yesteryears and subsequently in modern times under the patronage and management of the politicians, it has been popular more as a social, joyous, or even patiriotic, festival than a primarily devotional or spiritual event. Indeed, as Silie Lyngar Einarsen in her case study (Varanasi, UP, chapter 7) and Uwe Skoda in his (Bonaigarh, Orissa, chapter 4) demonstrate, Durgā Pūjā is gradually becoming popular with the urbanizing, industrializing, modernizing regions and among the relatively young populations of northern and eastern India,

The first public worship (as contrasted with the traditional private domestic worship) of the autumnal (*Śāradīyā*, that is, Śarat season) worship of Durgā was performed by *Rājā* Kaṁsanārāyaṇ of Tahirpur (in present Bangladesh) in 1583. The rituals for

Durga worship was formulated by his court *paṇḍit* Ramesh Śāstrī (Xenia Zeiler in chapter 6: 122; see also Narasingha Sil, "Durgá the Invincible Goddess," *Cincinnati Sharod Utsab* (Āśvin 25-26, 1409 Bengal Era [October 12-13, 2002]).   The community-based celebration, the so-called *sārbajanīn* based on voluntary(?) contribution from the local residents, began in Kolkata in 1790 when the expenses of the worship was shared by twelve [*bāro*] friends [*iyār*] of the neighborhood and this mode of the celebration was known as *bāroiyārī pūjā* (Zeiler, 123).

As Moumita Sen observes the community festival has become identified totally with the political power of the city of Kolkata, the heartland of the Bengali Durgā Pūjā. She reports how the Tṛṇamūl Congress Party, the political party in power, has made the female Chief Minister an embodiment of the goddess (105-19). Dr. Sen's study may be further complemented by the official claim of the West Bengal Government a few days before the onset of the festival in October 2018 that "the Durga Puja is quite simply the greatest public festival on earth" (cited in Bishwanath Ghosh, "It is Bengal calling for the 'greatest festival on earth'," *The Hindu*, October 1, 2018). There are some 28000 pujas across Bengal. Surprisingly, alas, Sen provides her scholarly analysis more of the virtually political representational, than of the intrinsically religious devotional, account of the Bengali version of the Navarātri festival. There is absolutely nothing on the religious/spiritual culture in respect of West Bengal's most popular festival—though this is more a case of deliberate personal choice than an oversight. In one sense, however, she has rightly figured the real interest of the Durgā devotees' in the "*pārbaṇ*" [festivity], rather than the in the "*pūjā*" [worship], aspect of the event. The spirituality attached to the holy days gets submerged in the carnival of the holidays, while the government's main aim being encouragement of more tourists into the state, especially the metropolis, with a view to boosting its economy with the revenues earned from the visiting revelers.

The most detailed description of the domestic Durgā Pūjā in Bengali style comes from the essay by Hillary Rodrigues based on his larger works published during 2003-09. Rodrigues deals with the procedures of the worship and the "symbols and meanings within the Durgā Pūjā" based on scriptural sources and from personal interviews with a scholar priest presiding over the worship at the home of a Bengali patron of Benares (chapter 10). Rodrigues writes, apparently relying entirely on what he saw and heard from his interviewee, most probably a *purohita*, that the latter "performs a series of self-transforming acts" such as "*bhūta śuddhi* rite…with the aid of *prāṇāyama* and various *mantras*" and various *nyāsas* whereby he "transforms his entire body into the vibrational body of the Goddess herself." Such statements appearing as factual events that are observable and determinable calls for, at least for the sake of academic discourse, the role of faith as for the Protestant explanation for transubstantiation in the Christian Mas. No doubt the author appears

to be an industrious researcher and a sincere reporter of the rituals in their intricate details. Sadly, however, his totally uncritical account makes it a passive report by a *testis oculis* but lacking a cultural/anthropological discourse. Even his use of the terms *jīvaśiva* and *paramaśiva* is idiosyncratic at best and problematic at worst. There is no such word as *jīvaśiva* meaning "limited self," and the word *paramaśiva* means "Śiva the Supreme God," and never "supreme self" (which translates in Sanskrit as *Paramātman*). Above all, his choice of Benares rather than Kolkata as the site of field research for studying the Bengali version of Durgā Pūjā has missed out on the festival's impact on the authentic Bengali social and cultural life. He could have studied the *pūjā* at one of the traditional aristocratic households of Kolkata (see Uttara Gangopadhyay, "Durga Puja: 10 Banedi Baris You can't Miss, *Outlook Traveller*, https.www.outlookindia.com).

Really speaking, Durgā Pūjā in Bengal—it is never called *Navarātri* in this Indian state except by the residents of non-Bengali origin —has become a festival of Hindu version of the Christian *mardi gras* climaxing into a colorful orgy on the tenth day the *Vijayādaśamī* (Daśerā for the non-Bengalis implying severing Ravana's ten heads), with its burgeoning I-Tech culture such as the use PC, Laptop, as well as the mushrooming of the now ubiquitous cell phone (aka "Mobile"), and the use of computerized cartoons and diorama (gone alarmingly viral in the Facebook). Neither Sen nor Rodrigues seems to recognize this fun-filled carnivalesque character of the Navarātri or Durgā Pūjā celebration and festivity. However, the fallout of this week-long *Mardi gras* type fanfare in the city that had metamorphosed into make-believe *pandals* resembling a version of the illusive Las Vegas of the Third World, is the ubiquitous ugly scarring of the streets, newly surfaced as well as the "normally" potholed, together with the piles of garbage adding accentuated stink to the existing open sewers—like an alcoholic "party animal" suffering from a long lasting hangover.

Readers of the work under review will likely face the problem of credibility and reasonableness in respect of an Aghori *guru* known as Aghoreśvar Mahāprabhu Bābā Bhagwan Ram aka "Sarkar Baba" (this curious moniker resonates with the more popular "*Swāmījī*") whose nonchalant claim to "incubate" the goddess has been reported as authentic by the unsuspecting scholar author presumably guided by some sort of Geertzian prescription for "thick description." The Aghoreśvar, acting as the priest of Durgā worship, makes his clients and visitors believe that he is making the goddess materialize. He further preaches that purity and impurity and divinity and defilement go together. Sadly, though Jishnu Shankar in chapter 11 provides meticulous details of every step of the Aghori ritual, he does not seem to query or decode the magical claims and contents of the Aghoreśvar's peroration.

The chapters 12, 13, and 14 deal with a remarkably playful worship during the Navarātri period in the states of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Kerala of southern India. This is called "Dasara festival" (chapter 14, 276) marked by the worship of play dolls [*golu* or *kolu*] performed by the women folks of the household, though men, too, participate. These three chapters are based on thorough field study and rigorous library research providing information on an aspect of the Navarātri *utsav* not be quite known in the northern half of India. In this context, it would be instructive to understand the terms *Daśerā* and *Daśamī*. While both contain the notion of ten: the tenth day of Ram's victory following his ad hoc invocation [*akālbodhan*] of the ten-handed Goddess in his battle with the ten-headed [*daśānana*] Rāvaṇ, the Bengalis, never calling the Durgā Pūjā either Navarātri or Daśerā, do celebrate another non-Durgā festival called Daśaharā [removing ten sins]. This festival marks the tenth day of the lunar fortnight of the month of Jaiṣṭha [April-May]—the date of the descent of Gaṅgā [the River Ganges] on the matt of Lord Śiva and thence on earth. It is believed that on this day a dip in the Ganges relieves bathers of ten sins.

Much like the dolls of southern India we see the little pre-pubertal girls being bathed, decked, and worshipped as a sequel to the Navarātri celebrations in the Kangra region of Himachal Pradesh of northern India. The author's minute description of the *kanyā* or *kumārī* ritual down to its minutiae betrays a tantalizing parallel to the *ṣoḍaśī pūjā* of the Śākta Tāntrikas of Bengal.

All in all, the *Nine Nights of the Goddess* is a masterfully edited and handsomely produced collection of studies of outstanding scholarship on a very popular Hindu religious festival. However, what is missing in the book under review—and this is no criticism but modest collegial observation—is a study of Mahiśāsura [the Buffalo King], Devī's *raison d'être* much as Devil is for the Christian God. Otherwise every chapter representing a discrete individual project is deeply researched and expertly written. The anthology's superb Introduction and Conclusion written by the two editors are indispensable as a guide to appreciate the variegated contents and commentaries of each chapter fruitfully. This is undoubtedly a scholarly *magnum opus* on the *Magna Mater* of Hindu South Asia.

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Krishna, Nanditha. (2017) *Hinduism and Nature*. Gurgaon, India: Penguin Books (Penguin Random House India Private Limited). Pp. 254, Price: INR 250, [ISBN: 9780143427834]. Paperback.

The Hindu way of life — Hinduism — spins around Nature and its diverse manifestations. Hinduism has evolved, over several millennia, on its own with people's experiences translating into faith. No other global faith, in high likelihood, emphasizes an environmental ethic, as does Hinduism. Its sacred books say in total clarity that humans are a part of Nature and Nature is to be venerated. An ordinary Hindu attempts to identify and unify the self with Nature and its perceptible manifestations, usually expressed as simple forms of devotion. An enlightened Hindu, in contrast, identifies and unifies the self with Nature, exploring both of its perceptible and subtle manifestations. The following segment from *Aśvata Vṛkṣa Stuti*— "I salute that *aśvata*, seeing which diseases flee, touching which the sins are destroyed, *and* surrendering to which I get long healthy life"— illustrates how a Hindu seeks the blessings of the *aśvata* (*Ficus religiosa, bodhi, pippala*). This example also clarifies how Nature and its components represent divinity in Hinduism.

Trained formally as an art historian, Nanditha, over the years, has developed a feverish passion to explore the subtleties of Hindu-belief system and its appreciation of the beauty of Nature. She has also been exploring how Nature can supply elegant examples in disciplining the disturbed and confused human mind. Involved in the C P R Institute for Indological Research and the C P R Environmental Education Centre, Chennai, India, she has contributed substantially to validating the richness of Indian heritage. I was, indeed, happy to get a copy of her latest book *Hinduism and Nature*.

The following statement on the back wrapper clarifies the intent of this book:

> … Nanditha delves into Indian rich natural landscape, which is suffused with mythical stories and religious significance. … The basis of Hinduism is dharma, or righteousness, incorporating duty, cosmic law, and justice.

Dharma (धर्म) is an unusual term confined to Hindu belief system and its corollaries, deriving from the Proto-Indo-European term *dʰer* meaning 'to hold on to', 'to support'. Its root word *dhṛ* means 'the one established' and 'the one that is certain', and thus becomes the societal dictate. However, today, in the Indian subcontinent, it has come to mean severally: 'righteousness', 'uprightness', 'virtues', and 'of moral values'.

This 254-page book *Hinduism and Nature* includes *Groves and Gardens, Divine Waters, Plants and Protectors, Children of Paśupati,* and *Abode of Gods* as constituent chapters, flanked by an introduction and a conclusion. I will offer my thoughts and comments on the chapters *Groves and Gardens* and *Divine Waters*, as examples, in the following paragraphs.

Nature, its symbolism, and its perceived divinity are articulate in various Hindu texts. Such details are available in the *āraṇyakā*-s that have evolved from *araṇya* — 'wilderness', 'forest'. *Āraṇyakā*-s explain the underpinning philosophy of sacrificial practices. Because an *araṇya* is considered divine, the *āraṇyakā*-s, are, therefore, sacred. The attributed divinity of an *araṇya* elevates it to its recognition as a Goddess, *viz.*, *Āraṇyāṇi.* Nanditha speaks about *Āraṇyāṇi* in page 27. References to *Āraṇyāṇi* in praise of Her enchantment and variety occur, for example, in the *Ṛg Veda* (Hymn CXLVI, Book 10).[1] In pages 39—63, Nanditha speaks of 'sacred groves'. Many Indian environmental scientists have enthusiastically added information to revitalizing our knowledge of groves (*araṇya*-s) in India held sacred traditionally by Hindus living in rural India. In that context, on the vibrancy of such 'isolated' and conserved forest patches, Nanditha forcefully speaks on the other dimensions of these groves and their perceived relevance in Hindu practice. For example, how, many of the natural areas get their names from the dominant plants, such as *Daṇḍakāraṇya* deriving its name from the *danda-trina* grass (a species of *Phalaris* (?), Poaceae), offer an interesting reading. Although Nature-centrism is the most dominant element in Hindu thinking, the story on the destruction of the *Kāṇḍava Vana* by the *Pāṇḍava*-s with the blessings of *Kṛṣṇa* to build *Indraprastha* indeed concerns me. This episode refers to the burning of an *araṇya* — held sacred by the Hindus — killing many an animal occupant therein*.* Chakravarthi Rajagopalachari's narrative referring to the conversation between the mother *śāraṅga* bird (*Ardea sarunga*) and her fledglings would touch the heart of any (http://literature.syzygy.in/mahabharata-rajaji/chapter-19-saranga-birds):

> '.. the worried mother bird began to lament: "The fire is coming near, burning everything, and soon it will destroy us. All forest creatures are in despair and the air is full of the agonising crash of falling trees. Poor wingless babies! You will become a prey to the fire. What shall I do? Your father has deserted us, and I am not strong enough to fly away carrying you with me." To the mother who was wailing thus, the children said: "Mother, do not torment yourself on our account. Leave us to our fate. If we die here, we shall attain a good birth in some future life. If you give up your life for our sake, our family will become extinct. Fly to a place of safety, take another mate and be happy. You will soon have other children and be able to forget us. Mother, reflect and do what is best for our race." Despite this earnest entreaty, the mother had no mind to leave her children. She said: "I shall remain here and perish in the flames with you."

What is striking is that the ancient Hindus recognized the five primordial constituents: the earth [soil], sky, water, air, and fire, and worshipped them as the *mahābhūta*-s. Shri Aurobindo explains these as 'subtle constituents of matter'. The *Agni*, reigns supreme among the five, since it always maintains the greatest purity in spite of any contamination. Ancient Hindus assigned an exalted status to *Agni*, therefore, by validating it as the intermediary between humans

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[1] http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rgveda/rv10146.htm.

and the Divine. Water is a gift from the Heavens (*varṣya*). Every Hindu's life intricately spins around water as demonstrated in diverse rituals (*karman*) associated from birth to death. Water (*āpa*) is holy. Every river is benevolent and hence auspicious. The following verse from *Kalki Purāṇa* (Chapter 34) offers an example of how grand a status *Gangā* enjoys in Hindu thinking:

> This holy river, *Gangā*, followed the footsteps of *Baghīratha*, the King. She routed the pride of *Airāvata* — the vehicle of *Indra*. She embellishes and enhances *Mahādeva*'s crown's beauty. She flutters like a flag on the Himalaya. Everyone glorifies her, be they demigods, demons, human beings, or serpents, or even *Brahmā*, *Viṣṇu*, or *Śiva*. She cleanses sinful actions and rewards with liberation.

The sacredness adds value to waters in general and the rivers in particular. The worst of sadness today is that such water systems, revered in Indian culture have been completely irrevocably damaged, because of our myopic vision of what we call as development. All of us know too well how badly Ganga is polluted presently.

Reading this book was a pleasant experience. The production quality of this book is neat: free of typos and easily readable text. Price is reasonable. Leaping flame and lotus flower artworks, used as page vectors, enchanted me. Penguin India has done a commendable job.

We Indians have been handed down a great heritage and culture. This book will be an eye opener for many of us, re-igniting the pride about our heritage and culture lost in the recent decades due to reasons that are obvious. Through this book, Nanditha makes a clarion call awakening us from the slumber of self-deception. This book should enable us to see the realities of our heritage and culture in a better and brighter light. My mind was repeatedly raising the questions: (i) Are we conscious that we are losing much of our time-tested culture and heritage? (ii) Are we so myopic that we are confuse development as being more vital than our valuable heritage?

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