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In the Hindu epic, the *Mahābhārata*, two sets of cousins, the Kauravas and Pandavas, become embroiled in a prolonged and tangled political battle over the rightful rulership of the kingdom of north central India. That conflict eventually culminates in a great war in which political (and familial) loyalties are challenged, old resentments and debts resurface, all types of stratagems are deployed, much blood is shed, and many lives are lost. Long before the war erupts, though, the members of each side of the Kuru clan take every opportunity to turn to the revered teacher and elder Bhishma Pitamaha,[1] for enlightened instruction on the meaning and application of *dharma*.

The term *dharma* confounds as easily as it clarifies understanding of what is right for a person to do on the basis of her or his class (*varṇa*), birth group (*jāti*), age, role, stage of life (*āśrama*), and gender (Patton 2008). A poignant example is evident in the epic's character of Yudhishthira, the (morally conflicted) Pandava king and Bhishma's steadfast disciple, as well as surrogate son.[2] Yudhishthira strives to be an exemplar of *dharma* with respect to the multiple roles he is expected to enact as the eldest son of Pandu and Kunti, the eldest sibling of the five Pandavas, the husband of the princess Draupadi, and following the war, the ruler of a war-torn kingdom. Given that the specific circumstances of his life cause Yudhishthira to realize, often painfully, the conflicting nature of the *dharmas* which he is expected to emulate, Yudhishthira struggles to make sense of *dharma*.[3] That is, throughout the epic, we find Yudhishthira asking himself, and others,

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[1] Bhishma Pitamaha renounced his claim to the same throne many years before out of a sense of duty (*dharma*) to his father, king Shamtanu. Despite his renunciation, Bhishma served the Kuru kingdom in his role as royal adviser.

[2] Due to circumstances beyond his control, and yet which make possible the fruition of the divine destiny of his birth, Bhishma serves as the surrogate father, and primary royal adviser, for both sides of the Kuru clan.

[3] India studies scholar, Laurie L. Patton makes a similar observation about the ethical struggle experienced by the warrior-hero Arjuna, Yudhishthira's younger brother, who takes center stage in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. In the Introduction to her translation of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Patton says that "the Gita is one among many

questions like, what am I supposed to do in a certain situation? How do I do it right? How do I know that what I have done *is* right? And, how do I draw the line between what is "right" and what is "wrong"? Despite the Pandavas victory over the Kauravas, and their gaining control of the Kuru kingdom, Yudhishthira spends the rest of his life ruminating over these questions.

Perhaps as much to comfort Yudhishthira as to unsettle his desire for certainty about the concept of *dharma*, Bhishma offers sage advice that he repeats in different contexts up until the time of his death on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. According to Bhishma, *dharma* is subtle and difficult to understand. He conveys this idea in a powerful scene of the epic that involves a not so straightforward gambling match. Yudhishthira is invited to play a game of dice with his (villain) cousin Duryodhana who, along with his one-hundred brothers and generals, has been plotting the reclamation of the Kuru kingdom from the Pandavas. Because the match is rigged from the get-go by the scheming Kauravas who are more than willing to exploit Yudhishthira's weakness for gambling to reclaim a throne that they believe is originally, and rightfully, Duryodhana's, Yudhishthira gambles away not only his rule over the Kuru kingdom, but also his wife Draupadi.

At Duryodhana's request, Draupadi, menstruating at the time and wearing a single garment, is dragged by her hair into the royal court in front of her elders, including her in-laws and Bhishma. Burning with anger, and humiliated by her mistreatment, Draupadi announces that a savage violation of *dharma* has taken place. She proceeds to question everyone present in the court about what she perceives to be an ignoble breach of *dharma* particularly in the context of whether Yudhishthira, who is unskilled in the game of dice, had the right to gamble her away when, as Draupadi emphasizes, she is his wife and "equal to him by birth" (2.62.10, Smith translation, 149). In a pithy reply to her question, Bhishma says: "O fair one, I have already said that the way of *dharma* is the highest; not even noble priests can follow it in this world. And in this world, whatever a powerful man regards as *dharma* is said by others to be *dharma*, even if it falls within the limits of *adharma*. I cannot judge this question of yours with certainty, because of the subtlety, profundity and seriousness of the issue" (2.62.15, Smith translation, 149).

Bhishma's explanation about *dharma* is profound. Its subtlety makes the exact meaning and application of *dharma* difficult to pin down in any single or fixed way. *Dharma* has often been translated in English as "eternal law," "duty," "correct action," "righteousness," "ethics," "religion," "morality," and "lot in life." In the view of India studies scholar John D. Smith, while these meanings "all come moderately close [to defining *dharma*]...none come close enough" (2009, xviii). In his abridged translation of the *Mahābhārata*, Smith makes clear that "A person's *dharma* is what it is right for that

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meditations on the nature of the basic question for each individual: 'What is to be done?' or 'How do I fulfill my duty so that I contribute to the overall harmony and right order of the universe?'" Thus, Patton observes that "There are many *dharmas* to be fulfilled, and certainly one way we can think of the *Gita*, and the *Mahabharata* as a whole, is a meditation on the conflict between multiple *dharmas*" (Patton 2008, xxi-xxii).

person to do, but one person's *dharma* is different from another's...A range of factors combines to determine what constitutes *dharma* for any given individual" (Ibid).[4] Speaking about *dharma* from an ethnographic perspective, anthropologist of religion Joyce Flueckiger concurs. Flueckiger says that "...it is not clear what the minimal practices or theologies might be that identify a person as Hindu. In daily life, there is no assumption that there is a single *dharma* appropriate for all to follow" (Flueckiger 2015, 6).

Many scholars of the Hindu traditions would agree with Smith's and Flueckiger's explanations of the semantic variability of *dharma* found in texts and lived practice. Analyzing *dharma* as an ethical concept from the standpoint of the classical Hindu literature, historian of religion Arti Dhand (2002) has called important analytical attention to the specific and the general dimensions of meaning embedded in textual and narrative constructions of *dharma*. Whereas the specificity of *dharma* distinguishes a person's unique socio-occupational positioning in connection with her or his gender, class, caste (*jāti*), age, and life station within a highly stratified and hierarchically-arranged social world, the general nature of *dharma* said to be common (*sādhāraṇa dharma*) to all, as Dhand has contended, "supersedes the codes that are predicated upon the particulars of a person's embodied existence" (2002, 358). Although conceived as two distinct levels of *dharma*, the particular and the universal can, and do, intersect, and just as the specifics can shift over the course of a person's lifetime, existential dilemmas can just as well make the seemingly straightforward application of universal virtues (e.g., truthfulness and non-violence) mutually exclusive. External circumstances and the ever-changing conditions, contexts, and times of human life[5] continually affect what *dharma* is and how it works for any person or community.

Thus, Bhishma's explanation about *dharma*'s subtlety appears to indicate that change itself constitutes an intrinsic property of *dharma*. If that is the case, what is equally provocative about Bhishma's statement has to do with the interpretive indeterminacy implied by the concept of *dharma* in the Hindu traditions. Its subtlety requires that individuals and communities work out the meanings and applications of *dharma* on the basis of many—distinctive or common—factors. Or, to put the matter in another way: the diverse manner that Hindus, whether they are renouncers or householders; whether they live in South Asia or the diaspora, have deliberated interpretations for what *dharma* is and is not illuminates, as Bhishma recognized, its subtlety.

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[4] See also the discussion in Patton (2008), xxi-xxiii.

[5] *Dharma* teachings illustrated in textual and vernacular traditions press on the notion that Hindu *dharma* also has to do with a specific era (*yuga*), time period (*kāla*), and place or country (*deś*), and that these different *dharmas* can affect the ways that individuals and communities apply the specific and general levels of *dharma* to their lives.

Importantly, the elasticity of *dharma* as an interpretive category demonstrates that Hindus, past and present; people born into the tradition as well as converts, have wrestled with questions of meaning and what is a good, righteous, and moral life. The definitions of *dharma* that people have, in effect, fashioned as authoritative either alone or in community, and in conversation with their everyday material and spiritual desires, concerns, and needs, convey varying notions of the good, the righteous, and the moral, and the values associated with those overlapping goals. Of course, the ancient sage Bhishma was not the only person to draw connections between Hindus' *dharma* interpretations and the enduring human search for meaning and order in the cosmos. Bhishma's words continue to echo in the teachings of Hindu sages and gurus in modern times.

The stories told by the late Hindu renouncer (*sādhu*) and guru affectionately known as Swamiji (literally, "respected teacher"), and presented in the ethnographic work of anthropologist Kirin Narayan (1989), offers a helpful, modern-day example of the interpretive indeterminacy, and as Bhishma himself suggested, subtlety of the concept of *dharma*. Speaking about the role of religion (*dharma*) in human life, and that humans decide what religion means, Swamiji has said,

> Who were all these religions [*dharma*] made for? For people. So they can live in justice, in righteousness, and order, and not do ill to others. This is why *dharma* was created. People made all this...It was with the inspiration of the Inner Self [*ātman*]. People thought: "This is good to do, that is good to do." Using their own wisdom, they made rules of how things should be done... [In response to a question that Narayan asks Swamiji a few days later for clarification on *dharma*, Swamiji elaborates further on his point that *dharma* is a human construction. He says:] It's people who make religion...the Lord doesn't make it. Now, the Hindus, the Muslims, the Buddhists, all made their own religions. Actually, there is just one sort of religion: that which is made by people. We think over something, we write it down: "this is a good way to live" (Narayan 1989, 228).

How Hindus across time and space have come to decisions about what is a "good" way to live whether in relation to all Hindus or to a specific class of Hindus, not to mention which Hindus have participated in the processes of decision-making, and which methods and sources of inspiration have been used to authorize specific interpretations, have provided much intellectual fodder for debating the swath of meanings and applications of *dharma* in Hinduisms. Swamiji's view that people together create what *dharma* is all about at any specific moment in history and in any specific place aligns with French sociologist Daniele Hervieu-Leger's theory of religion as "collective memory" (2000). Hervieu-Leger argues that religion represents a collective "chain of memory" whose interpretive boundaries are repeatedly reimagined, reaffirmed, and mediated by past, present, and future members with the effect that the shared memory ("tradition") accomplishes its own legitimacy and becomes the heart of a community's identity and existence.

The teachings of sages like Bhishma and Swamiji contribute as much to sustaining the chain of memory about *dharma* as to fashioning *dharma* as the collective memory (or "tradition") of Hindus. The endless varieties of contexts in which Hindus' lives are, and have been, situated make possible an almost endless number of interpretations for what *dharma* is and how it can and should be practiced in the world. Every interpretation that becomes part of the tapestry of collective memory participates in constructions of *dharma* as constitutive of Hinduisms, as well as creates new, innovative, or alternative possibilities for thinking about the concept of *dharma* as Hindu "tradition" and for making claims about its ongoing relevance in rapidly transforming world societies. The symbolic, social, and material practices of everyday life with regard to Hindu rituals, images, mythologies, institutions, performances, textual and vernacular traditions, art and material culture, festivals, and foodways encode the shifting moral, economic, political, cultural, and gendered expectations of people's worlds and become the means by which novel and alternate *dharma* interpretations are imagined, constructed, and embodied (Flueckiger 2015).

By implication, then, changing conceptions of *dharma* in the transmission of collective memory shine light on the ways that the Hindu traditions not only change in response to shifting socio-cultural situations, but also that what people understand "Hindu" to mean changes as well. The interpretive shifts that arise in (re)conceiving the meaning and place of *dharma* in the modern world provoke new and vital arguments about authenticity in contexts of identity formation, ethical subjectivities, moral traditions, and religio-ritual practice. The interpretive indeterminacy with which Hindus have debated these issues suggests that the authority of any interpretation of *dharma* remains a contested understanding by and among Hindu communities, even as *dharma*'s conceptual fluidity questions the idea that Hindu "collective memory" is uniform and static.

As we said earlier, external circumstances play a signal role in shaping the concept of *dharma*—and that of Hindu—and notions of the good, the righteous, and the moral. As with most societies, the challenges of contemporary life in India are many. Whether the issues concern environmental pollution, globalization, gender oppression, the moral disorientation typically associated with migration and the increasing urbanization of India, the growing economic disparities between the emerging middle class and the poor, or the ethical dilemmas that arise from the perceived clash between "traditional" and "modern" values—these variable situations give concrete expression to circumstances that can potentially disrupt and alter the collective memory of Hindu *dharma*.

The present volume of articles in this themed issue of *Nidan* titled, *The Moralizing of Dharma in Everyday Hinduisms*, examines the complex interface between the challenges of modern times and the revisioning of *dharma* by Hindus in everyday contexts. In our use of "everyday Hinduisms," we draw from Flueckiger's description of the concept in relation to "the everyday ritual and narrative practices of specific people in specific places" (2015, 1). In Flueckiger's words: "Given the centrality of everyday practices in Hindu

traditions, over both time and space—including the foods one cooks at particular ritual occasions—I would prefer to expand the boundaries of what counts as 'religion' to include 'ways of life' rather than to exclude Hinduism" (4). The articles in this volume advance scholarly understandings of what "counts" as *dharma* in lived practice and pay particular attention to the interrelation of tradition and innovation in contemporary Hindu reconstructions of *dharma* and the cultivation of ethical subjectivities that result from Hindus' rethinking the application of *dharma* in the 21st century.

Examining Hindu communities' engagement with both textual and vernacular traditions to reimagine *dharma*, the articles' analyses are based on the individual authors' extensive fieldwork in different regions of India and/or in the United States. The majority of these *dharma* communities are transnational (See papers of Heifetz, Robison, and Bhatt in this volume), even as others desire a much more modest status in the cultivation of local and transregional community networks (DeNapoli in this volume).

With one exception, the articles in this volume have reworked papers that were presented at the 2015 *Society for the Anthropology of Religion* conference in San Diego, CA. All of the articles deal in an explicit manner with the theme of religion, ritual, and morality in the Hindu traditions; all of the articles approach this topic through use of ethnographic methodologies and interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks. The articles provide specific contexts and case studies for thinking about new and alternative ways of theorizing the moral and its authorizing parameters in connection with the diversity of living Hindu *dharmas* in India and the United States. Most importantly, the great potential of this volume lies with emphasizing the need to recast the idea of *dharma*, which operates predominantly as a descriptive category in the scholarship on Hindu traditions and South Asian religions, as analytical concept for imagining the indeterminacy of the moral in the experiences and practices of Hindus across time and space (cf. Jain 2011). Flueckiger similarly approaches her study of *dharma* from an analytical frame "to identify narratives and practices that help to structure or shape everyday Hindu lives" (2015, 3). We also hope to show through the authority of the ethnographic data the analytical subtlety of *dharma* in contexts of Hindu ethical life by shining light on the ways that performance negotiates the interpretive indeterminacy of *dharma.* The evolving notions of what "counts" as the Hindu traditions "on the ground" indicate *dharma*'s shifting definitional, and moral, parameters. For example, Tulasi Srinivas's forthcoming (2018) work on wonder considers the synthesis between *dharma* as an ethical code and moral obligation and *ācāra* (customary norms and laws of specific social groups; an authoritative source for understanding *dharma*) in practice and brings them together to argue that for and in everyday Hinduisms *dharma* is a fluid ethical code. In sum, we see *dharma* in the contemporary moment and, in this set of papers, as a fluid ethical concept of analysis that allows us to explore various Hindu groups and their moral dilemmas.

Through the ethnographic case studies analyzed, this volume showcases the "ethical life" of modern Hindu communities and explores the relationship between embodiment and

constructions of the moral in collective reimaginings of *dharma* (Pandian and Ali 2010). While the majority of the articles uses the conventional Sanskritic pronunciation of "dharma" to talk about their communities, one of them (DeNapoli's) employs the vernacular Hindi pronunciation of "dharm." Applying the insights of South Asia ethics scholars Anand Pandian and Daud Ali, who emphasize that the concept of "ethical life" concerns "the ways in which people practically engage themselves and their worlds as beings invested with moral potential" (2010, 3), this volume suggests on the basis of the collective evidence that by engaging the challenges of modernity, Hindu communities link the immediate issues of their lives with a religion that promotes the deeper meaning of Hinduism aimed at destroying ignorance, transforming consciousness, and realizing connection with the divine. Pushing *dharma* as the negotiated collective memory of Hindus into new realms of interpretation and practice, the communities described by the authors demonstrate the ongoing relevancy of core Hindu values for dealing with contemporary situations, and inspire people to confront what it means to be Hindu, Indian, moral, and modern in a world of growing consumption, exploitation, and globalization.

As the Hindu communities whose teachings and activities are examined in this volume deal with the rapidly changing circumstances of their lives, what kind of moral vocabularies do they develop to navigate their worlds? What types of moral dispositions and sensibilities do they stress in the cultivation of ethical selfhood? How does the notion of ethical selfhood engendered by these communities delineate concerns with authenticity? Which practices become central to the modern fashioning of a moral self and the pursuit of a virtuous life? Finally, how do the communities create alignment between their visions of the moral and a Hindu *dharma* for the modern world? These are the questions that our contributors grapple with in their articles.

The goal of this volume is to provoke deeper theoretical reflections on the ways that modernity, in which heightened self-reflexivity is said to reveal an aspect of the present transnational milieu, shapes Hindu ideas of the moral and the production of alternative modernities in contemporary South Asia. To that extent, the volume calls attention to the kind of modernity that Hindu ethical life as featured in everyday practice makes possible. Such spheres illustrate unorthodox sites for responding to modern problems and envisioning a world informed by egalitarian values.

With few exceptions, modernization studies have tended toward the abstract and universal, examining new forms of modernity taking shape in the nation state, rather than in ordinary contexts. Building on political scientist S.N. Eisenstadt's theory (2000) that the encounter between cultural traditions and Western modernity produces what he terms "multiple modernities," this volume argues on the basis of its case studies that the Hindu communities featured here are critically engaged in fashioning resilient and transformative worldviews that are responding in creative ways to India's current

challenges. What is more, by turning to the resources of their traditions and extracting from them a plausible moral vocabulary with which to make meaningful sense of those challenges, these communities are committed to envisioning an Indian, and Hindu-inspired modernity, that serves as an alternative to the more dominant model of a western-derived modernity. Both the editors of, and the contributors to, this volume share Pandian's and Ali's contention that "modernity in South Asia has always been two-faced, looking forward to the challenges of contemporary existence only from the standpoint of the inherited traditions that lend meaning and direction to its futures" (Pandian and Ali 2010, 13).

In our first paper, Daniel Heifetz's discussion brings into focus the moral codes, ritual practices, and religious teachings that form the ethical life of a modern Hindu reform movement known as the Gayatri Pariwar. With its headquarters located in Shantikunj, Haridwar, the movement was founded by the late husband and wife couple, Shriram Sharma (d. 1991) and Bhagwati Devi Sharma (d. 1994), who are called by Gayatri Pariwar members (*parijans*) as Gurudev and Mataji, respectively. In present times, however, managed under the leadership of the Sharma's daughter and son-in-law, namely Shailbala Pandya and Dr. Pranav Pandya (Doctor-sahib), the Gayatri Pariwar movement has generated, as Heifetz says, "a large network of local centers in urban and rural India" and "is populated by thousands of permanent residents and visitors." According to Heifetz, the movement has become transnational by opening "a number of new centers in places with a large South Asian immigrant community such as Central Jersey, the San Francisco Bay Area, Toronto, and London." Heifetz suggests that the appeal of the Gayatri Pariwar both to highly educated urban Indian STEM professionals and village Indians who have little or no education has to do with this movement's claim that it teaches a "scientific spirituality" whose authority derives from what is said to be the universal applicability of its central practices of Gayatri *mantra* recitation and *yajña* (sacrificial ritual). Although the Gayatri Pariwar employs the Sanskritic vocabulary of the Hindu traditions to cast itself as a universal spirituality, Heifetz shows that its universalist claims relate to the movement's struggle to unhinge the notion of *dharma* from its dominant association with the text-based, particularist understandings of the concept illustrative of a person's class, life stage, and gender (i.e., *varṇāśrama dharma*).

Thus, Heifetz's article makes apparent the ideological disjuncture between the Gayatri Pariwar's rhetorical gestures of heightening the significance of its universal morality and de-emphasizing particularistic *dharma* that characterizes its evolving ethical life in 21st-century India. In his analysis of the personal narratives of the Gayatri Pariwar *parijans* with whom he worked, Heifetz explains that emphasis is placed on "a contrast between religion-*dharma* as duty or moral obligation, and spirituality as virtue cultivation." According to Heifetz, "The Gayatri Pariwar has developed an elaborate discourse about the value of ritual activity, especially its two main practices, Gayatri recitation and *yajña*...The Gayatri Pariwar presents these practices as universal technologies for forming moral selves that are rooted scientific authority. This tripartite shift, from the particular

to the universal, from moral obligation to moral technology, and from textual authority to scientific authority represent a marked move away from traditional understandings of how these practices relate to Hindu *dharma*." Linking its emphasis on ritual practice to the authorizing precedent established by the 19th-century Hindu reform movement of the Arya Samaj, and drawing on models of science articulated by Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi, as well as ethical approaches that integrate pre-Enlightenment (particularistic) and post-Enlightenment (universalist) moral styles, the Gayatri Pariwar recodes the key rituals of Gayatri *mantra* and *yajña* as "technologies that inscribe morality onto the bodies of its practitioners." Moreover, it revives Vedic-inspired rituals for people who, as Heifetz suggests, feel increasingly dissatisfied with the spread of India's middle class consumerist lifestyles.

In our next article by Antoinette DeNapoli, the ethical life of a female Hindu guru known as Bhuvneshwari Puri and her devotional community is examined with respect to Bhuvneshwari Puri's public performance of *dharm-kathās* (literally, "*dharm* stories") throughout North India. As DeNapoli explains, Bhuvneshwari Puri's *dharm-kathā* events consist of the performance of religious stories (*kahāniyān*) and personal experience narratives by which she constructs the ethical subjectivity of nature (*parivéś*) in general and advances the moral vocabulary of empathy (*saṃvedanā*) to advocate her vision of the environmental empathy of *dharm* and illustrate her idea of the moral Hindu. DeNapoli's article shows that Bhuvneshwari Puri's practices are bringing about tangible ecological transformations on the basis of their power to interrogate late modern capitalism's ideal of unfettered material consumption as illustrative of "the good life."

Since many of Bhuvneshwari Puri's devotees, like Gayatri Pariwar members discussed by Heifetz, are mostly middle class and educated Indians working in the STEM professions, DeNapoli indicates that the Hindus who make up Bhuvneshwari Puri's circle have similarly become disoriented by western-derived, capitalist driven models of modernity and are imagining alternatives with the potential to restore humanity's broken relationship to the world of nature. Hence, the appeal of Bhuvneshwari Puri's *kathās* involves her drawing on general virtues like love and compassion to craft a universal ethical language of empathy, which, at the same time, speaks to the specific embodiments of the people whom she teaches and seeks to transform.

Focusing on two separate *dharm-kathās*, specifically one which occurred at Bhuvneshwari Puri's ashram in Rajasthan on the high holy day of *Sharad Poornima* (Autumn Equinox), and one which took place in the Union Territory of Silwasa at the invitation of Bhuvneshwari Puri's devotees, DeNapoli argues that "through performance Bhuvneshwari Puri affectively expands the standard meanings of *dharm* to include the idea of environmental empathy by aligning the emotional subjectivities of her audience with those that she attributes to nature and its ideal protector Ram, the hero featured in the epic *Rāmāyan*." DeNapoli says, "Performing the 'rhetoric of pain,' Guru Ma stresses that

the moral sentiments of love (*prem*), mercy (*dayā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), forgiveness (*kṣamā*), and joy (*ānand*) represent the five 'senses' of *dharm*...Their actualization in humanity's everyday relationships with nature as a whole engenders ethical subjectivity and the Hindu moral 'body'...The complex of emotional impressions conveyed in connection with the notions that nature represents an empowered co-creator of life, an intelligent moral agent, and a 'friend' of humanity...establishes the environmental empathy of *dharm*." According to DeNapoli, the primacy that Bhuvneshwari Puri gives to received cultural understandings of the "heart" and "feelings" to imagine a new application of *dharm* in modern times shows the power of emotion to evoke environmental empathy and stimulate new kinds of human-nature relationships. DeNapoli further contends that "in the moral ecology that Bhuvneshwari Puri fashions for her community, the moral idiom of 'feeling *dharm*' as opposed to 'doing *dharm*' provokes ecological change and safeguards, as her *dharm-kathā* practices suggest, the 'body' of nature, the moral 'body' of Hindus, and the cosmic 'body' of the planet."

Our third article returns to the issue of Hindu communities who are rethinking the intersection of the universal and the particular dimensions of *dharma* in the context of their revisioning the classical brahmanical concept of *varṇāśrama dharma*. Claire Robison discusses the ethical life of Indian members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) in the modern cityscape of Mumbai, with whom Robison worked. Robison's article brings to light the ethical teachings and practices of members who belong to the Radha Gopinath temple of Girgaon Chowpatty, which is also known as "Chowpatty." Robison argues that the Chowpatty's central practice of *daiva varṇāśrama dharma*, which Chowpatty community literature translates as a 'Vedic system of social organization with a spiritual perspective,' reconfigures the particularistic vision of *dharma* in the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition by emphasizing the notion that "one's placement in this system is based not on birth or *jāti* (birth-based group) but [rather] on character (*guṇa*) and actions (*karma*) in this present life." Robison explains that for the ISKCON Chowpatty community, "this revisioned approach to *vaidika* Vaiṣṇava ethics takes shape in a community-wide pastoral care network called the Counselling System, aimed at training ethical selves to embody a model of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* in sync with brahmanical lifestyle norms." Examining the fluidity of *dharma* as an interpretive category in Chowpatty's Counselling System, Robison makes clear that "the preeminence of the category of the brahmanical" encoded in ISKCON Chowpatty's ethical system of daiva *varṇāśrama dharma* morphs into an "aspirational value" for its members across the class, caste, gender, age, and education spectrum and, in effect, helps revive "what are seen as lost brahmanical values within a city that does not encourage them."

To provide a context for the meaning and application of *daiva varṇāśrama dharma* systematized by ISKCON Chowpatty, Robison maps the cultural history of a specific lineage of modern Gaudiya reformers in late colonial Calcutta and their influence on the rise of the transnational missionary movement of ISKCON, which was founded in New York in 1966 by A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami (d. 1977). Robison shows that the repurposing

of *varṇāśrama dharma* evident in Bhaktivedanta's theology can be traced to the set of religious reforms set in place by his guru, Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati, and by Bhaktisiddhanta's father, Kedarnath Datta Bhaktivinoda Thakura. Against this backdrop, Robison argues that "[i]n a milieu of challenges and reformulations to the caste system...Bhaktisiddhānta and later Bhaktivedānta steered modern institutionalized Gaudiya Vaiṣṇavism toward a course of both universalism and traditionalism, encoding new and comparatively egalitarian norms into an underlying fabric of brahmanical ritual and lifestyle patterns." The Counselling System, which "became a trademark structure of the Chowpatty community" from the late 1990s onward, provides a context in which Chowpatty's Indian members articulate and embody the reimagining of Gaudiya *dharma*. Through the holding of bi-weekly informal meetings at members' private homes, or at the Gopinath temple, between counsellors and counselees, and through formal temple programs and *kīrtana* chanting sessions,[6] the members strive to develop collective understandings of "Vaiṣṇava etiquette" and ethical orientations consonant with dominant brahmanical values and moral codes.

What is more, according to Robison, the primacy of "training of the self—particularly the self-in-community" emphasized by Chowpatty ISKCON "aims to produce a model of pure Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* through the practice of...personal and community-based religious rituals and lifestyle restrictions. In this, the Counselling System draws from its foundation in *varṇāśrama* categories, in seeking to reproduce an idealized and structured form of a religiously oriented society. However...Chowpatty's Counselling System provides a space for the cultivation of an alternative modernity among [its] members" and, by doing so, allows "individuals to participate in a revisioned *varṇāśrama-dharma* system within the modernized setting of Mumbai."

The final article in our volume by Kalpesh Bhatt shines important new light on the international Swaminarayan community of BAPS (Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha) as practiced in the San Jose, California, chapter. As Bhatt explains, the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha represents "a Hindu religious movement that has spread globally in the last four decades and can be found in contexts as diverse as the Adivasi (tribal) communities in rural India to the second-generation Indian diaspora in North America." Through extensive ethnographic research conducted with Indian American BAPS devotees, Bhatt explains that the ethical life of this devotional community involves the practice of *nityapūjā*. In BAPS, this practice describes a personal ritual form of worship, "in which [devotees] engage both somatic and cognitive practices for about

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[6] *Kīrtana* chanting as practiced in the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition(s) describes the daily practice of repetitive religious chanting of the names of Krishna, or Vishnu, as a form of meditation and ethical practice.

half an hour. Unlike most forms of *pūjā* in which a deity, a guru, or an ascetic is publicly worshipped, BAPS *nityapūjā* is a private ritual in which each practitioner owns a personal set of *mūrtis* [laminated images] to be worshipped. BAPS considers this ritual as a part of everyday *dharma*, reinterpreted in terms of '*sadācāra*,' or righteous conduct." Bhatt seeks to understand how, and to what extent, *nityapūjā* performance brings about moral agency and everyday ethics, as well as allows BAPS devotees to negotiate challenging social circumstances in ways that improve their lives and well-being. Bhatt develops a "ritual-moral" model that illuminates a lived theory of normative ethics. Countering theories of ritual as "non-intentional ontological stipulation," Bhatt argues that *nityapūjā* "is both individualized and intentional action designed for self-willed association with spirituality and divinity."

Drawing on the moral theory of the "Big Three" ethics of Community, Autonomy, and Divinity as developed by anthropologists Richard Shweder, Jonathan Haidt, and their collaborators, Bhatt's article contributes a unique analytical model for conceptualizing the practice of *dharma* in the contemporary world. Bhatt contends that a ritual-moral model of Hindu ethics illustrated through the practice of *nityapūjā* in BAPS "can help scholars make sense of how Hindu morality and 'intuitive ethics' are intricately related with everyday dharmic rituals and practice and, thereby, reimagine the age-old idea of *dharma* in the concept of present-day normative ethics and applied ethics...." Applying the ethnographic data to his model, Bhatt shows that the somatic dimensions of *nityapūjā* correspond to an Ethics of Community in which "[t]he routinized bodily practices seem to strengthen the social bond of the practitioner as part of a community and her or his role as a member of a group with a position, station, or function that is immediately connected to the self and the other. Such practices could potentially bring forth collective conscience and moral consideration to participate in, be reliant upon and indebted to, and contribute constructively towards integration of a group or a set of diverse groups."

The next area that Bhatt examines in his ritual-moral model has to do with the Ethics of Autonomy. As he suggests, the cognitive elements of *nityapūjā*, such as "introspection about the true nature of the self being inherently pure, peaceful...and the like" and "contemplation on the form and attributes of divinity, Bhagwan Swaminarayan in this case," reinforce moral agency and autonomy. Bhatt says, "While focusing primarily on self-examination and self-cultivation, such spiritual practices create...an inclusive space for others even amidst egregiously problematic conduct." The last aspect of the Big Three Ethics investigated by Bhatt with respect to the Ethics of Divinity "pertain[s] to following divine injunctions and teachings prescribed in sacred texts, striving to avoid moral degradation, and coming closer to spiritual purity. This ethic concentrates on divinity-oriented virtues such as humility, equanimity, and integrity, and characterize persons primarily in spiritual or religious ways." In his analysis of the ethnographic narratives Bhatt demonstrates that both the somatic and cognitive components of *nityapūjā* converge "in a complementary manner" in the Ethics of Divinity. Drawing on scholar of religion Tanya Luhrmann's term of the "hyperreal," Bhatt argues that *nityapūjā* makes

possible what he calls "magical realism," which "materializes when [devotees'] cognitive practices seamlessly synthesize with the bodily practices, realigning and reinforcing the immanence with transcendence, the material with the immaterial." For Bhatt, a ritual-moral model "helps us rethink the ancient concept of *dharma*...as a moral compass that continually realigns with its adherent's somatic and cognitive practices as well as contemporary concerns and conditions."

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Yajña without Dharma?: Ritual and Morality in the All World Gayatri Pariwar

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Abstract

The All World Gayatri Pariwar is a modern Hindu movement working to revive *yajña* and Gayatri recitation. The movement constructs these practices as universal moral technologies rooted in scientific authority rather than as *dharmic* in the sense of caste or gender specific moral obligations rooted in textual authority. In this article, I utilize evidence gathered through ethnographic research and a review of the movement's literature to explore the ways in which the Gayatri Pariwar shifts Vedic-style ritual away from conventional notions of *dharma.*

Keywords: Hinduism, Modernity, Gayatri Pariwar, Performance, Yoga, Ritual Practice

Around 7 A.M. on my first morning at Shantikunj, the main ashram of the Haridwar-based All World Gayatri Pariwar, I was awakened by a knock on my door. One of the men at the ashram had been sent to fetch me for the daily *yajña* all ashram residents were expected to attend. Bleary-eyed, I was ushered through the frigid, twilight air of January 2012 to a room near the ashram's three *yajña* pavilions. There, confused but compliant, I was helped out of my jeans and into a saffron *dhotī* (traditional Indian men's clothing) by a small group of ashram men. Exchanging my Western-style pants for an unstitched Indian-style garment was the closest I came to receiving any form of conversion or initiation into the traditionally high-caste ritual in which I was about to participate.

Daily rituals are a central part of life at Shantikunj. The Gayatri Pariwar has developed an elaborate discourse about the value of ritual activity, especially its two main practices, Gayatri recitation and *yajña*.[1] These practices have deep historical connections to notions of Hindu *dharma*, specifically in the sense of particularistic moral obligations rooted in textual authority. But as I will show in this article, the Gayatri Pariwar presents these practices as universal technologies for forming moral selves that

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[1] Respectively, these practices entail recitation of an ancient prayer called the Gayatri *mantra* and the performance of ritualized offerings into a fire altar.

are rooted in scientific authority. This tripartite shift, from the particular to the universal, from moral obligation to moral technology, and from textual authority to scientific authority represent a marked move away from traditional understandings of how these practices relate to Hindu *dharma*.

The core of my argument will take the form of a discussion of Gayatri recitation, *yajña*, and the ways in which the Gayatri Pariwar conceptualizes these practices. But before coming to this discussion, I must offer two key pieces of context. The first will be an exploration of the concept of morality, in which I will develop a framework for my discussion through a review of some key literature. The second key piece of context will be an overview of the Gayatri Pariwar, since this movement has been the subject of very little scholarship and is unfamiliar to most readers. In particular, I will focus on situating the movement in the broader landscape of modern Hindu traditions by examining some of the formative experiences of the movement's founder.

Morality and Dharma

Recent literature, including pieces by Anand Pandian and Daud Ali as well as Jarrett Zigon, offers a basic dichotomy in how Western intellectual traditions have understood the concept of morality. In one ideal type, morality has to do with internal rational thought. Individuals are confronted with a moral quandary, they process it rationally, settle on a course of action, and finally act. Such a perspective has an obvious Enlightenment genealogy, and so bundled up with this is a kind of universalism – even if humans are making moral decisions as individuals, reason operates the same for everyone and so what constitutes the correct moral decision will be the same for everyone (Pandian and Ali 2010, 3-4; Zigon 2007, 133).

Another ideal type of thinking about morality focuses on technologies that allow humans to fashion themselves into beings with certain moral orientations. The emphasis here is no longer on rational reflection in response to specific moral quandaries, but rather on the deliberate cultivation of bodily dispositions toward certain kinds of virtuous behavior. Individuals train themselves to embody certain virtues, they are confronted with a moral quandary, and react in accordance with their training. This tradition has roots in pre-Enlightenment thought, and as Zigon (2007) and Mahmood (2011) have suggested, this tradition is localized and particularistic in contrast to the universalism of the post-Enlightenment position outlined above.

These two ideal types are Western intellectual categories – categories that have had a substantial impact in postcolonial India and are consequently useful for understanding a Hindu reform movement like the Gayatri Pariwar. But indigenous categories are equally important, especially given my interest in understanding how the Gayatri Pariwar conceptualizes practices traditionally understood through the category of *dharma*.

While Leela Prasad (2007; 2010) has cautioned against treating *dharma* as the sole definitive category for understanding Hindu ethical systems, she analyzes it as an important concept in the formation of Hindu ethics and morality. In her discussion of *Śastra*, Prasad outlines a number of features of *dharma* as it has developed through Hindu intellectual history. The Mīmāṃsaka school of philosophy, for example, asserted that the only appropriate *pramāṇa*, or "way of knowing" *dharma* was Vedic testimony (*śabda*) (Prasad 2007, 102).[2] Other ways of knowing might be useful for other subjects, but they were useless for knowing *dharma* on their own. The *Dharmaśāstras* seem to draw their extensive enumeration of norms for conduct from traditions with no apparent Vedic source. Regardless, the picture of *dharma* that emerges from these texts involves a code that governs much of human behavior, but often deals specifically with persons having a particular caste, gender, or other social classification (Prasad 2007, 105-107).[3] In contradistinction to dominant post-Enlightenment models of morality, we have in *dharma* a code of conduct that is not generated through individual human rationality and often not universal.

With respect to practices like Gayatri recitation and *yajña*, *dharma* has historically been both particularistic rather than universal and rooted in textual authority rather than empirical or rational evidence. But as I will show in much of the remainder of this article, the Gayatri Pariwar understands their practices to have a rational, empirical basis and to be universal, echoing post-Enlightenment moral styles. Meanwhile, the Gayatri Pariwar presents *yajña* and Gayatri recitation not as moral obligations to be fulfilled in support of the cosmic order, but rather as technologies that inscribe morality onto the bodies of practitioners. In conceiving of these practices in this fashion, the movement places as much emphasis on pre-Enlightenment moral styles as it does on post-Enlightenment ones in conceptions of the moral.

These two moral styles illustrate a spectrum of moral possibilities, so it is not particularly surprising that the Gayatri Pariwar utilizes a mixed approach in understanding its ritual practices. The movement's commitment to seeing a connection between morality and ritual precludes a purely post-Enlightenment moral style, even as their commitment to popularizing these practices in the modern world demands that

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[2] One important articulation of this epistemic principle is found in commentaries on Jaimini's Mīmāṃsā Sūtra 3.1: "Because *dharma* is founded on Vedic testimony, what is not founded on Vedic testimony is inapplicable" (*dharmasya śabdamūlatvādaśabdamanapekṣaṃ syāt).* (Author's translation).

[3] *Dharma* is often tied to specific caste or gender identities, but not always. As Prasad notes, alongside these identity-specific *dharmas*, there is a common *dharma* that all Hindus must follow. Arti Dhand (2002) interrogates this matter in greater depth, concluding that the notion of *dharma* as always being particularistic emerges in part from a tendency to treat the *dharmaśāstras* as the sole authority on the subject of *dharma*. Nonetheless, since Gayatri recitation and *yajña* are practices that have been historically only available to upper-caste men, my framework utilizes the narrower sense of identity-specific *dharma* that I have outlined here.

they adopt some elements of post-Enlightenment moral styles. The Gayatri Pariwar's conception of *yajña* and Gayatri recitation may be mixed, but this mixture does not include a sense of these practices as being particularistic, textually rooted moral obligations – as *dharma* in a conventional sense.

In fact, in my conversations with Gayatri *parijans*[4] and in the movement's literature, references to *dharma* have been scarce. Especially in recent discourse, the notion of spirituality has displaced *dharma*. A conversation with one Shantikunj resident named Dina illustrates this shift well. A woman of about fifty, Dina grew up in Ahmedabad but had lived in Shantikunj for over ten years. Speaking initially on the difference between spirituality and religion, her comments quickly reveal that she conceives of religion and *dharma* as synonymous, following a common Hindi-English translational practice:

> Religion is one type of virtue. It is a duty, religion is.... Suppose you are coming from outside. What is my religion? What is my duty? That I should give all the comforts and whatever you want, what is your need, we should fulfill all those things. That is original ritual, means, we say, "*dharma*." Means what is my duty? What is our duty? That is *dharma*. And spirituality is different. Spirituality means we have to improve our inner things. That we have, what to say, *karuṇā* [compassion], *dayā* [mercy], *prem* [love], *udārtā* [generosity], *ātmiyatā* [closeness, intimacy], and all the real qualities of insight, that is spirituality.... That is spirituality, and spirituality develops all these things.

Here Dina sets up a contrast between religion-*dharma* as duty, or moral obligation, and spirituality as virtue cultivation. Many Gayatri *parijans* espoused a similar dichotomy, and as this article will show, Gayatri recitation and *yajña* are fundamental to this process of virtue cultivation.

The Gayatri Pariwar as a Neo-Hindu Movement

Led initially by Shriram Sharma (1911-1991, hereafter "Gurudev," following community convention) and his wife Bhagwati Devi Sharma (1926-1994), the Gayatri Pariwar is similar in many ways to other guru-centered "reform" or "Neo-Hindu" movements. Many Gayatri *parijans* who reside permanently at Shantikunj hail from the Indian middle class, but outside of the ashram, the movement is surprisingly popular among rural Indians with less formal education. Their tendency to utilize Hindi rather than English is one of many key factors in generating this popular appeal. The movement has a large network of local centers in urban and rural India, but Shantikunj is the headquarters and is populated by thousands of permanent residents and visitors. After the deaths of

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[4] Gayatri *parijan* is the term members of the Gayatri Pariwar use for themselves in the sense of "member of the Gayatri family."

the Sharmas, the leadership passed on to their daughter and son-in-law, Shailbala Pandya and Dr. Pranav Pandya (hereafter "Doctor-sahib," following community convention), who have maintained the movement's vitality, adapting it well to post-liberalization India. Under their guidance, the movement has opened a number of new centers in places with a large South Asian immigrant community such as Central Jersey, the San Francisco Bay area, Toronto, and London. The Gayatri Pariwar aspires to extend its reach beyond India and its diaspora, but at least for now, this aim is yet to be realized.

Gurudev's hagiographies associate him with a number of key figures and institutions that contributed to the development of modern Hinduism. The Arya Samaj holds a prominent place among these associations, and indeed, Gurudev's affinity for the Arya Samaj was strong enough that he served as head of the Mathura branch in the early 1940s. This position was short lived, as Gurudev parted ways with the Arya Samaj over their opposition to image worship (Pandya and Jyotirmay 2009, 436, 464-468). Prominent Gayatri *parijans* I spoke with were ambivalent about Gurudev's erstwhile ties to the Arya Samaj. For instance, Vireshwar, who had been introduced to me as one of Gurudev's oldest living followers, informed me that Gurudev wanted to appeal to a broader segment of the Indian population by retaining harmless popular practices. Accordingly, a key part of the ritual life at Shantikunj is a twice-daily *ārati* performed at a small Gayatri Mātā temple.

Gurudev's reason for leaving the Arya Samaj is illuminating, but there are significant similarities between the two movements. Their shared focus on the revival of Vedic ritual differentiates both movements from another common stream of Neo-Hinduism, which traces its lineages through figures like Vivekananda and Rammohan Roy and draw much more heavily on Vedānta and Yoga (De Michelis 2005, 37-38). Both movements assert that these rituals can be scientifically proven to have medical and ecological benefits (Prakash 1999, 86-88, 92-95), although the Arya Samaj is much more insistent on the epistemic sufficiency of the Vedas (Llewellyn 1993). Social engagement is central to both movements, although the Arya Samaj favored a top-down approach to social engagement that involved reforming the upper strata of society (Llewellyn 1993, 79, 128). By contrast, the Gayatri Pariwar places strong emphasis on grassroots forms of social engagement. Finally, like many other Neo-Hindu movements, both the Arya Samaj and the Gayatri Pariwar call for the reform of some Hindu ideas about caste and gender (Llewellyn 1993, 8-9).

While these similarities to the Arya Samaj are significant, the Gayatri Pariwar prefers to emphasize Gurudev's association with Gandhi. Compared to the Arya Samaj, Gandhi plays a much more substantial role in Gurudev's most extensive hagiography, *Odyssey of the Enlightened*. Similarly, when asked about Gurudev's formative experiences, Gurudev's grandson, Chinmay Pandya, downplayed the significance of the Arya Samaj while focusing on the inspiration he drew from Gandhi's social vision. The authors

describe how Gurudev participated in Gandhi's movement by "adopting" a village to participate in grassroots social organizing there (Pandya and Jyotirmay 2009, 348, 376-383). The Gayatri Pariwar has continued this pattern of grassroots organizing in its institutional structure by keeping village India at the center of its mission.

Odyssey of the Enlightened includes a description of a brief but telling encounter between Gurudev and Gandhi in 1931. Gandhi initially chides Gurudev for his ritualistic inclinations, characterizing them as a waste of time (Pandya and Jyotirmay 2009, 341-342). Gandhi had a marked disinterest in the outward trappings of Hindu traditions, but was nonetheless concerned with religion, and especially in the ways it could contribute to a healthy, free India. Gandhi was particularly interested in elements of religions that he saw as leading to personal moral development, including non-violence, celibacy, and fasting (Arnold 2001, 165-166). For Gandhi, these practices became obsessions because they were inextricable from the independence movement since he believed that moral bodies were healthy bodies, and healthy bodies were the cornerstone of the nation (Alter 2000, 138).

But Gurudev was never persuaded by Gandhi's dismissal of ritual, and he and his followers have continued to view such practices as technologies for cultivating healthy, moral bodies capable of further refining the Indian nation. But Gurudev does seem to agree that a life of self-discipline and moderation have a major role to play in reforming society as well. Gurudev encouraged his followers to take up regular fasts and to avoid non-procreative sexual activity. At Shantikunj, residents must live a simple, quasi-monastic life in which they are permitted to have families but are expected to live very simply – regardless of what kind of volunteer work they contribute to the community. Consequently, ritual activities aside, Gurudev's ideas about how an individual's lifestyle relates to his or her capacity to advance the Gayatri Pariwar's social mission bears strong resemblance to Gandhi's.

Gandhi made significant use of scientific rhetoric, and especially the notion of experimentation to describe his activities and to exhort others to join him. For Gandhi, an ashram like Sabarmati, and later Sevagram, or even a body like his own could function as a laboratory, as capable of establishing objective, transcendental truths through direct, personal experience as its brick-and-mortar equivalents could through their elaborate instruments (Alter 2000, 22-23). Gurudev similarly suggested that practitioners must only accept practices that they experience to have tangible results by improving their physical or psychological well-being.

While Gandhi and the Arya Samaj are the two most crucial reference points for locating the Gayatri Pariwar in the landscape of modern Hinduism, there are other personalities and institutions that bear mentioning either due to their sheer influence on modern Hindu traditions or because Gurudev encountered them in his formative years. The first of these is the Theosophical Society – *Odyssey of the Enlightened* briefly mentions

Gurudev's association with this group, although it does not elaborate much on the extent of his involvement (Pandya and Jyotirmay 2009, 366-67, 374). There is a likely connection to Theosophical lore in the Gayatri Pariwar's view that Gurudev has been chosen by ancient, incorporeal yogis to bring about a new "golden age" or *satyug*.

Finally, it is difficult in discussing any Neo-Hindu movement to avoid considering its relation to Vivekananda, given his wide-ranging influence. While he does not appear frequently in Gayatri Pariwar discourse, Doctor-sahib (Gurudev's son-in-law) does discuss Vivekananda in his book *The Pioneers of Scientific Spirituality*. In his chapter on Vivekananda, he narrates a meeting between Vivekananda and William James in late 1896. In Pandya's telling, James, who had heard Vivekananda lecture at Harvard and read his book *Raja Yoga* was keen for more information. Vivekananda gave James a private lecture on the methods of observing the effects of the practice as the yogi achieved higher states of consciousness (Pandya 2009, 131-135). While Doctor-sahib does not offer explicit commentary on this narrative, the larger framework of the book locates both Gurudev and Vivekananda in the common project of reconciling spirituality with science. As Elizabeth De Michelis (2005) has argued, Vivekananda played a crucial role in systematizing nineteenth-century discourses that attempted to reconcile science with Hindu traditions. But it is worth noting that like many of his Neo-**Vedāntic** forebears, Vivekananda did not share Gurudev's enthusiasm for ritual. As such, Gurudev's conviction that Vedic ritual could be reconciled with science may align him more closely with the Arya Samaj.

Ritual at Shantikunj

Several months into my field research, I asked Somnath, who was my primary contact at Shantikunj, if I could participate in one of the movement's intensive introduction courses. He recommended that I should do it during *Vasant Navarātrī,* since Gayatri *parijans* believe that the benefits of all of their practices are intensified during this time of year. It turned out that the intensive entailed following the ashram schedule rigorously while remaining celibate, eating very plain foods, living simply, and perhaps most importantly, participating in *yajña* and reciting thirty *mālās* of the Gayatri *mantra* (a roughly four hour process) every day for eight days. Gayatri *parijans* refer to intensive practices that follow these norms as "*anuṣṭhān*."

I am focusing on Gayatri recitation and *yajña* in this section because they are the Gayatri Pariwar's key practices, which many Shantikunj residents undertake daily in a less intensive fashion. One senior Shantikunj resident, Vireshwar, explained the importance of these practices to me in the following terms: "As you think, so you do. So if your thoughts are purified, your actions will be purified. Purifications of your thoughts and emotions, that is Gayatri. And purification of your *karm* [action], that is *yajña*." One of the Gayatri Pariwar's guiding documents, the "100-point Plan for Transforming the Era" (or, *Yug Nirmāṇ Yojanā*) offers a similar perspective – Gayatri recitation and *yajña*

are the "spiritual foundation" of a better society because they instill moral virtues like discipline, humility, selflessness, and generosity in practitioners (Brahmavarchas 2011, 138-139). These explanations illustrate the importance of these practices, but just as importantly, they also show how they are being conceived of as rituals that inscribe virtue onto the bodies of their practitioners rather than cosmic moral obligations.

Gayatri Recitation

During *anuṣṭhān*, Somnath encouraged me to recite about half of my *mālās* for the day around sunrise, and so I generally started the first of three sittings at 6 A.M. After circumambulating the outdoor *samādhi* (or burial shrine) of Gurudev and Bhagwati Devi Sharma, I found a spot nearby and began my first set of Gayatri recitations. Somnath had suggested the spot near the *samādhi* as a particularly good place to do this practice, and dozens of other Gayatri *parijans* were in the area doing the same. Sitting on the cool marble floor or on simple mats, the practitioners faced the *samādhi* and mouthed the Gayatri mantra in near silence. We each held a *mālā* in our right hand, generally hidden by a shawl, to keep track of our numerous recitations. With few exceptions, the assembled Gayatri *parijans* maintained an intense focus on their recitation. Even if they were sitting with friends or family members, their mouths rarely stopped their recitation and their eyes remained either closed or fixed upon the *samādhi*. My presence, too, a rarity at an almost exclusively Indian ashram, did not provoke the usual curious stares from those who were engaged in Gayatri recitation.

Several days into the *anuṣṭhān*, a group of visitors arrived at the ashram and stood near the *samādhi,* taking in the sight of the practitioners who had gathered for their morning Gayatri recitations. One man in this group noticed me, broke away from his group somewhat spontaneously, walked toward me smiling, and reverently touched my feet. The ethnographer in me wanted to drop my *mālā* on the spot and ask the man why he had chosen to engage with me in this manner and not any of the other countless ashram residents nearby. But as my mind raced to process our encounter and considered how best to respond, the man moved on and the opportunity to question him slipped away. I suspect that this visitor found me to be a striking sight, my red beard and freckled complexion juxtaposed against the saffron *kurtā* (long cotton tunic) and *dhotī* that all male ashram residents wear. The startling sight of a foreigner like me engaged in Gayatri recitation must have been charged with a greater emotional intensity than the far less surprising sight of Indians engaged in the same practice nearby.

I understand emotions like the one experienced by this ashram visitor to be a constructive force of ritual's capacity to structure identities and communities.[5] Sara Ahmed's notion of affective economies illustrates how this works. In an affective

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[5] On the capacity of ritual practice to construct identities and communities, see Bell (2009); Rappaport (1999).

economy, an object of emotion circulates between bodies, molding these bodies to a particular shape in the process and aligning similarly disposed bodies together (Ahmed 2004b, 1, 9-10). I understand ritual activity as a kind of labor that establishes an affective economy, structuring the selves of ritual actors as their bodies experience the objects of emotion embedded in the framework of their ritual activity. I may have thought myself to have been simply engaged in an act of participant-observation, but by reciting the Gayatri *mantra* in that place, in those clothes, as a Westerner, I had inadvertently broadened the circulation of the Gayatri *mantra*, strengthening its affective currency in the process (Ahmed 2004a, 119-120).

The surprise that this ashram visitor experienced at seeing me engaged in Gayatri recitation is no doubt partially a result of the fact that I am very clearly not of a twice-born caste. There is no *dharmic* obligation for a non-Brahmin male like me to undertake this practice. Moreover, this practice would have, from an orthodox standpoint, traditionally been verboten to someone of my impure ritual status. My ability to practice Gayatri recitation with no requirement for conversion or initiation reflects the Gayatri Pariwar's deep commitment to the idea that its practices, including Gayatri recitation, can be taken up at any time by anyone, regardless of caste, gender, or indeed, nationality. As such, the Gayatri Pariwar's efforts to revive Vedic-style ritual are broader in scope and more radical than those of the Arya Samaj, which were focused on Indians and involved a "reconversion" ceremony (Llewellyn 1993, 99; Jaffrelot 1998, 16).

One useful source for understanding the way Gayatri *parijans* think about Gayatri recitation as a universal technology of moral self-fashioning with a scientific basis is Gurudev's text *Gayatri Mahavigyan* (also called *Super Science of Gayatri* in translation). In my conversations with many residents of Shantikunj, this was one of the first texts I was told to read if I wanted to understand the movement. This text also played an important role in the conversion narratives of a number of Gayatri *parijans* who emphasize their scientific temper. A.K., for example was a medical doctor born in 1936 in Madhya Pradesh. When he read *Gayatri Mahavigyan* in 1960, he found its "science of consciousness" compelling because it went beyond the medical science of the day. He resolved that as a "man of science," he should meet with Gurudev to question him further on the text. Given the crucial role this text plays for scientifically minded Shantikunj residents like A.K., its ritual discourse warrants serious consideration.

Early on in *Gayatri Mahavigyan,* Gurudev describes how the Gayatri *mantra* activates 24 energy centers located in the body and in turn 24 related desirable personal qualities – in other words, it cultivates virtue. He commented that this process follows predictable natural laws and involves no divine intervention, accentuating that practitioners should know "that it is not by way of some unexpected gift from somewhere but...the result of a well organized scientific process of spiritual growth" (Sharma 2010b, 18). Gurudev's thought suggests that expecting Gayatri recitation to pay off through natural causality rather than through a divine boon aligns the practice with science.

While articulating the power unlocked by Gayatri recitation, Gurudev shifts tactics, illustrating his points by way of analogy to established scientific concepts. According to Gurudev, at the base of our spine, an atom (*parmāṇu*) called "*koorma*" is attached to the "*brahmanadi*"[6] at the base of the spine, where the *brahmnāḍī* coils around the *koorma*, forming the "*kundalini.*"[7] After describing this subtle physiology, Gurudev argues that this feature of the human body is the key to unlocking limitless and powerful "vital energy" or "*pran*"[8] by way of an analogy with nuclear power. The text quotes physicist Arthur Compton at some length, as he waxes poetic about the seemingly limitless new possibilities harnessing nuclear energy will bring to human society (Sharma 2010b, 120-121).

The text offers surprising detail in pursuing this analogy:

> In uranium and plutonium the interlocking of atoms is in an oblique, irregular manner so that their breaking-up is easy as compared to the atoms of other metals. In the same manner it is easier to regulate the movement of living atoms located in *kundalini*, according to one's desire (Sharma 2010b, 120-121).

Here we see that Gurudev draws on the authority of modern nuclear physics to explain the mechanisms by which those results are achieved. The text describes atoms in human subtle physiology as working according to the same natural laws as fissile materials.

Not only does our subtle physiology offer possibilities similar to that of splitting the atom, it has been researched by an analogous methodology in the ancient world:

> Just as scientists of every country today are busy in doing research on physical atom, the spiritual scientists, *rishis* who had realized the truth, had conducted deep research in ancient times on living atoms in [the] human body in seed form (Sharma 2010b, 121).

This is a central aspect of Gayatri Pariwar discourse. Indeed, within minutes of arriving at Shantikunj for the first time, I was told that the *ṛṣis* were scientists and the Vedas, the recorded results of their experiments. As such, all of the experimentation the Gayatri Pariwar conducts is about recovering knowledge that the *ṛṣis* already generated rather than somehow displacing their work with new knowledge.

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[6] This spelling of "brahmanadi" (i.e., without use of diacritics) reflects that of Gurudev's. In Yogic physiology, the *brahmnāḍī* is an energy conduit which runs up the base of the spine.
[7] This spelling of "kundalini" represents that of Gurudev's. In Yogic physiology, *kuṇḍalīni* is a pool of energy that rests at the base of the spine.
[8] "Pran" here corresponds to Gurudev's popular spelling of the term.

A third tactic for legitimizing Gayatri practice through scientific authority is closely related to Gurudev's discourse about the *ṛṣis* as scientists. For a sufficiently skeptical reader, it might seem problematic to suggest that the *ṛṣis* alone were capable of scientifically validating Vedic-style ritual practice. Gurudev suggests that ordinary people can indeed reproduce the *ṛṣis* observations, but only with suitably well developed technology: "Sound waves, atoms or air, germs of diseases cannot be seen by the naked eye, still their existence cannot be denied. Yogis have seen these chakras by their yogic vision and have gained miraculous knowledge, insights, and powers through investigations of the inner being of man" (Sharma 2010b, 124). Yogic vision becomes a desirable research instrument that may be used to observe firsthand the workings of one's subtle physiology. This promise of empirical proof thus represents a third way to call upon scientific authority to legitimize ritual practice.

In sum, Gurudev's discourse about Gayatri recitation in *Gayatri Mahavigyan* suggests that this practice will have the same positive effects on every body, regardless of caste, gender, religion, or culture because we all have the same innate capacities built into our subtle physiology. Its positive effects can be observed by anyone, once again regardless of their identity. By presenting the results of Gayatri recitation, the mechanisms by which they are achieved, and the ways in which they are known as consistent with known laws of nature and empirical-rational epistemologies, this discourse allows readers who identify with the idea of science to experience Gayatri recitation as a practice that is consistent with their identity. In other words, this ritual practice is rendered coherent with their emotional investment in the idea of science.[9]

My conversations with Gayatri *parijans* about Gayatri recitation engaged themes that were very similar to those found in *Gayatri Mahavigyan*. A conversation I had with a Shantikunj resident named Ashutosh illustrates these similarities well. A man of about thirty at the time of our conversation, Ashutosh had moved to Shantikunj in 2009

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[9] Thinking about science through the framework of affect and emotion may seem counterintuitive to some readers. Science is a rational endeavor, and emotion is not supposed to play much of a part. My interest in thinking about science as something emotional is inspired by recent work in the area of affect theory that strives to disrupt the postmodern humanities' cognitive and linguistic preoccupations. Affect theory draws our attention instead to visceral experience, to emotion, and to the body's capacity to be affected by non-linguistic, precognitive vectors of power. See Ahmed (2013); Cvetkovitch (2012); Gregg and Seigworth (2010); Schaefer (2015); Stewart (2007). By foregrounding affect, this article highlights how scientific authority makes Gayatri *parijans* feel, especially while their bodies are engaged in ritual activity.

I do not adopt this framework to make light of Gayatri *parijans'* commitment to rationality and science. Rather, I understand our affective and cognitive capacities to operate in tandem, but see the former as being less adequately explored than the latter, especially in relation to science.

For an excellent study on the role of scientific authority in Hindu ritual discourse within a different theoretical framework, see Dempsey (2006) and (2008).

because he had found his work in the IT industry in Mumbai and Bangalore to be empty. He found great fulfillment in the Gayatri Pariwar's efforts to revitalize society, and saw Gayatri recitation as the key to this process:

> So [the reform of society] can only be a divine wish, for which [Gurudev] is an instrument. And he chose the Gayatri *mantra*, which is a universal prayer; it is not confined to a specific sect or religion.... This he propagated throughout India and across the world.... [H]e chose Gayatri *mantra* to elevate the intellect of the common masses so that they can rise above their very selfish lives and work toward their own spiritual good and also uplift the society as a whole.

Ashutosh's emphasis on the universality of this practice and its efficacy for instilling moral virtue reflects Gurudev's discourse very closely.

In terms of the scientific basis of these practices, Ashutosh told me that for his part, he was willing to take all of Gurudev's teachings on faith. But Gyaneshwar had a different experience. Born in the 1970s in Deoria District, Uttar Pradesh, Gyaneshwar was a medical doctor and self-described former atheist who initially rejected his family's piety as mere superstition. While he was dealing with intense culture shock as a medical student in Moscow, Gyaneshwar decided that he wanted to reconnect with his roots, and read *Gayatri Mahavigyan* on the recommendation of a friend:

> I read that and the way of explanation, the way of presentation and the reasoning behind all these practices given by Gurudev influenced me a lot and I understood properly why we do all these things. Till then my understanding was that it's just mainly a ritual, they are performing superstitiously. Then I came to know what the scientific reason behind this is.

Gyaneshwar resolved to undertake an *anuṣṭhān* in his home village upon completing the book, and soon after repeated this process at Shantikunj. Gurudev's scientific discourse in *Gayatri Mahavigyan* changed Gyaneshwar's emotional orientation toward ritualized Gayatri recitation. Prior to reading this text, Gyaneshwar felt that there was a disjuncture between his identity as a scientific person and ritual practice. This disjuncture evoked Gyaneshwar's contempt for superstition. But reading *Gayatri Mahavigyan* and its presentation of Gayatri recitation as scientific changed Gyaneshwar's emotional relation to the practice, rendering it coherent with his identity. Gyaneshwar's body was aligned with the practice and eventually with the community of similarly disposed bodies at Shantikunj.

Yajña

Every morning during *anuṣṭhān*, I would join what seemed to be the shortest of the queues outside Shantikunj's three *yajña* pavilions. I could hear the dozens of worshippers packed into each pavilion chanting, progressing through the *yajña's* multiple stages. After a few minutes, the previous group exited and the queue moved in. There were eight fire altars in each pavilion, and about eight people sit around each altar – men and women, residents and visitors, Brahmins and non-Brahmins, friends, family, and strangers all intermixed. While the first and last groups to enter the *yajña* pavilions have a more complex ritual to follow that involves kindling and extinguishing the fire, the majority of ashram residents arrived between these two shifts and only engaged in the middle portion of the ritual, which lasted about fifteen or twenty minutes. The procedure we followed will likely be familiar to many readers: we purified ourselves with water and *prāṇāyāma*, worshiped the earth and the fire altar, and anointed one another with sandalwood paste and rice before offering pinches of herbs to the accompaniment of *mantras* to various deities.

There are two particularly noteworthy touchstones that help to shape the emotions and meanings that circulate during these ritual practices. The first of these was a crucial moment in the founding of the Gayatri Pariwar – a massive public *yajña* Gurudev organized in 1958. The movement claims that as many as 400 thousand participants took turns performing *yajña* at 1024 fire altars. Despite protest from "orthodox" Hindus, Gurudev invited everyone, regardless of caste or gender, to participate in these ritual practices that were normally reserved for Brahmin males (Brahmavarchas 2011, 148-151). The message of this public spectacle is clear: *yajña* is universal and should not be reserved for high caste men.[10]

A second important touchstone took place at Brahmavarchas Shodh Sansthan, a research center the Gayatri Pariwar opened near Shantikunj in 1979 for the sake of studying the "physiological, psychological, and para-psychological" effects of Gayatri Pariwar practices (Pandya 2009, 174-177).[11] When I visited this center during my field research, the resident researcher, Hari (a pseudonym), gave me a tour of the facilities after answering a few of my questions about his work. He guided me through a series of laboratories oriented around a center courtyard, describing the kinds of research that could be done in these labs, most of which involved taking various biometrics from practitioners to look for changes in their physiological state.

At the conclusion of his tour, Hari brought me into a small freestanding structure situated in the middle of the courtyard, surrounded by a picturesque garden teeming

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[10] *Yajña* as a public political spectacle has become well established in modern India. See van der Veer (1994); Lubin (2001); Menon (2012).

[11] For most purposes, this facility has been replaced by Dev Sanskriti Vishwavidyalaya, the Gayatri Pariwar's much newer university.

with medicinal herbs. Inside this central laboratory, Hari described the studies Doctor-sahib – Gurudev's son-in-law who has since become head of the movement – had conducted here before ascending to the movement's leadership. At the center of this room, there was a traditional fire altar located beneath a large exhaust hood. At this altar, Doctor-sahib performed the traditional fire offerings that are fundamental to Gayatri Pariwar ritual life for the sake of conducting various experiments. For example, he would collect the smoke given off by the fire pit as various substances were offered into it. He would then expose various pathogenic cultures waiting in petri dishes to this smoke in order to argue that *yajña* would cure diseases and improve one's health.

The reverence that Hari had for this laboratory and the experiments that Doctor-sahib had done there was palpable. In his demeanor, I sensed the kind of awe I might have expected of a very pious person at a major pilgrimage site or in the company of a great holy person. The fact that this researcher was so emotionally moved by what had happened in this space – a space of seeming disenchantment – illustrates the powerful emotions bound up with scientific authority for some Gayatri *parijans*, and the ways in which ritual practice can mobilize those emotions. Most importantly, Hari's attitude toward this space shows that the Gayatri Pariwar's efforts to legitimize its practices on the basis of scientific authority are profoundly important to some Shantikunj residents.

The results of Doctor-sahib's experiments and others like them are summarized in a pamphlet called *The Integrated Science of Yagya*. Written by Rajani Joshi, this work focuses on what happens chemically when one performs *yajña* and its potential environmental and medical benefits. After enumerating substances that are burned during a *yajña*, Joshi offers an analysis of the chemical composition of the resulting smoke – thymol, formaldehyde, etc. (Joshi 2010, 5-10). Having established this chemical composition, Joshi goes on to situate this practice among the evils of modernity, such as "industrial wastes, rapid urbanization, deforestation, air and water pollution, disturbances in the ozone layer formation, radioactive waves, etc." (Joshi 2010, 13). Joshi then argues that the formaldehyde found in *yajña* smoke has a disinfectant effect that kills bacteria. He similarly asserts that it kills or repels pests and protects crops naturally. While articulating these benefits, he refers to a number of studies that show that ghee burnt in a *yajña* protects a space from radiation, for example, and improves the chemical composition of nearby air while killing waterborne bacteria (Joshi 2010, 14-19).

Moving on to medical applications of *yajña*, Joshi asserts that "In a physical laboratory, it might not be possible to demonstrate the spiritual effects of *yagna*, but the physical and mental effects of *yagnas* can certainly be tested, and the claims to cure physical and mental diseases through *yagna* can be verified" (Joshi 2010, 20). This focus on the physical and mental effects of *yajña* signifies a shift to the material in more recent Gayatri Pariwar discourse. Joshi describes a number of studies in which subjects were exposed to both fake and real *yajñas*, then their biometrics were recorded. Only the real

yajña brought about an improvement in their conditions. Another case study presents blood sugar data from a diabetic before and after taking up regular *yajña*, again demonstrating improvements (Joshi 2010, 21-26).

At this point it will be helpful to draw some comparisons between *Gayatri Mahavigyan* and *The Integrated Science of Yagya*. Gurudev's approach to marshaling scientific authority involved asserting that Gayatri recitation did not work by divine intervention, showing how this practice was analogous to modern scientific ideas, and affirming that practitioners could empirically observe all of this for themselves. The representative examples I offered were almost entirely about the psychosomatic effects of Gayatri practice and generally referred to subtle physiology to make its points. In contrast, Joshi spends very little time discussing the psychosomatic and subtle physiological effects of *yajña*, bracketing it mostly in a five page long section at the very end of the work. Joshi instead focuses on chemistry, ecology, and medicine – all quite thoroughly in the material realm – and marshals a conception of science that is primarily laboratory based and conducted by professional researchers.

Historically speaking, the difference in the scientific rhetorics deployed by these two books may reflect changing conceptions of science, or at least what kind of science could be considered persuasive: laboratory science may seem more authoritative in post IT boom India than the kind of scientific rhetoric Gurudev deploys in *Gayatri Mahavigyan*. Perhaps *yajña*, with its obvious materiality, is easier than Gayatri recitation to subsume into the kind of ontology laboratory science requires. On the other hand, Gayatri recitation seems rather internal and personal, thereby perhaps better suited for association with scientific rhetorics that focus on analogy and psychosomatic manipulation of subtle physiology. A move toward laboratory science may almost necessitate a shift in rhetorical focus from *yajña* to Gayatri recitation, although officially the Gayatri Pariwar still considers Gayatri recitation to be slightly more important than *yajña.* If such a shift in focus has in fact taken place, it would, finally, correlate interestingly with the leadership of Doctor-sahib, who was involved in laboratory research just like that described by Joshi.

Conclusion

The discussion of the Gayatri Pariwar's ritual life that I have presented in this article illustrates that the movement conceptualizes Gayatri recitation and *yajña* not as particularistic moral obligations rooted in textual authority as they would be in traditional notions of Hindu *dharma.* Rather, the Gayatri Pariwar presents these practices as universal moral technologies rooted in scientific authority. We have seen the shift from the particular to the universal most dramatically in the movement's massive 1958 public *yajña.* Also significant in illustrating the universalism of Gayatri Pariwar discourse is Gurudev's assertion in *Gayatri Mahavigyan* that Gayatri recitation's benefits accrue through subtle physiological mechanisms that all humans share. My own

personal experiences of having access to both practices as a Westerner with no formal conversion or initiation are also salient here.

The epistemic shift from textual authority to scientific authority is evident in Gurudev's emphasis on natural causality, coherence with the laws of nature, and empiricism. Doctor-sahib's experiments and similar research described by Joshi also illustrate this shift to scientific authority. My anecdotes about Gyaneshwar and Hari, who were deeply emotionally invested in the idea of science, illustrate the importance of this shift for the Gayatri Pariwar.

Finally, these practices have routinely appeared in the material I have presented as technologies for cultivating moral predispositions rather than as moral obligations. We see this in Dina's eagerness to disassociate religion-*dharma* from spirituality and in Vireshwar's description of Gayatri recitation and *yajña* as tools for purifying our thoughts and actions. This sentiment also appears in the Gayatri Pariwar's "100-point Plan," which describes these practices as the "spiritual foundation" of a more virtuous society and in *Gayatri Mahavigyan*, which describes the Gayatri mantra's capacity to unlock desirable qualities.

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"Nature is our true friend": The Environmental Empathy of a Modern Female Guru in North India

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> *The day we develop into the best humans is the day we'll take care of the earth in a real way.*
> –Guru Ma Bhuvneshwari Puri, July 7, 2015

Abstract

This article describes and analyzes the rhetorical performances (*dharm-kathās*) of a modern female Hindu renouncer (*sādhu*), who is affectionately called Guru Ma, in order to spotlight a cultural phenomenon which is characterized as "experimental Hinduism," and which is evident in Guru Ma's performance of narrative to reformulate *dharm* through the frame of environmental empathy in her public *dharm-kathā* events. Based on extensive ethnographic research conducted in North India with Guru Ma and her community between 2013 and 2015, this article suggests that Guru Ma performs a new meaning of *dharm* that foregrounds environmental empathy and the moral agency of nature. Through her performances, Guru Ma constructs nature as an intelligent and compassionate moral agent of *dharm*, which embodies the expanding moral consciousness and power of the divine Absolute. Her performances also work to evoke ecological change in her community and interrogate late modern capitalism's ideal of unfettered material consumption as illustrative of "the good life."

Keywords: Hinduism, ethics, environmentalism, modernization, sādhus, renunciation, performance, modernity

Ethnographic Vignette—November 4, 2013, Rajasthan, India

The ashram of Guru Ma Bhuvneshwari Puri pulsates with life. Her devotees sit in the shade of a banyan tree and make ritual designs (*yantra*) symbolizing the nine planets (*navagraha*) for an upcoming event at the ashram. Taking clumps of soil (*miṭṭhī*) gathered from the ashram's land, and mixing that soil with *miṭṭhī* collected from various sacred sites throughout India, the devotees pour water over the

miṭṭhī and shape the mixture into a square form. They decorate their designs with flowers, leaves, and other organic substances grown at the ashram. Each of the completed designs will represent one of the nine planets which, as Guru Ma says, help sustain *dharm* in the universe. A visiting renouncer (*sādhu*) walks around Guru Ma's ashram collecting herbs from Guru Ma's garden to prepare an Ayurvedic tonic he plans to distribute to Guru Ma's devotees. There are many devotees at the ashram. All of them engage in some type of service (*sevā*). Some devotees clean the grounds and the surrounding shrines; others work in the composting area; and others discuss the best types of trees to plant around the ashram in order to create a natural boundary wall on the property. Guru Ma brings my attention back to our conversation about the meaning and practice of *dharm* in modern times. With her eyes focused on the making of the nine *navagraha yantras*, she says, "*Dharm* is not only rituals and traditions. It is about feeling connected to nature [*prakṛti*]. Just listen to the voice of the birds. Run your hands through the blades of grass. Understand that you are feeling God [Parabrahman]. You are touching God [Brahman]. When you are feeling nature, you are feeling God [Brahman]. If a person loves God, he [or she] will take care [*sambhālnā*] of the environment [*pariveś*]. He [or she] will understand how to treat nature correctly. We cannot put trees in the entire India, but we can plant trees around us. We can say no to plastic. We cannot make this a law, but that's o.k. It's not possible to ban all plastic. But each person can decide that she [or he] will not use plastic. That will be a big start to changing our India. The place from where you learn how to love, when you learn to love for real, at that time, you will love the earth, the trees, the birds, all creatures. When we feel true love, we respect all life. We see that nature has intelligence [*cetnā*] and is alive [*jīvit*]. We cannot do anything without nature's help. It is the greatest teacher of *dharm*."

Image: A *navagraha* ritual design made by Guru Ma's devotees. Photo by A. DeNapoli

Introduction: Reimagining Dharm as Environmental Empathy in Everyday Hinduisms
This article examines the ways that a North Indian female Hindu guru and renouncer (*sādhu*) by the name of Bhuvneshwari Puri Guru Ma (hereafter, Guru Ma) performs stories to reconceive the concept of *dharm* in the rapidly changing landscape of South Asia. It examines her *dharm-kathā* (lit., "*dharm* stories" or "*dharm* tales") performances through which she negotiates the meaning of *dharm* from within the context of environmental empathy in everyday Hinduisms. Drawn from the "rhetoric of renunciation," which consists of religious narratives (*kahanīyān*), devotional songs (*bhajans*), and sacred texts (*pāṭh*), Guru Ma's *dharm-kathās* give concrete expression to what ethicists of South Asia Anand Pandian and Daud Ali have characterized as "the embodied practices of ethical engagement through which [moral] dispositions may be cultivated and shared" (2010, 2). Her *dharm-kathās* represent a type of moral pedagogy (a rhetorical practice that is simultaneously didactic and prescriptive) and a moral performance in contemporary India. By "moral performance" I mean performance-centered practices by which she constructs "a grammar of ethical selfhood" (Ibid, 10) through use of the moral language of empathy that takes into account her community's middle class socio-economic status and inspires people's moral commitment to the world of nature.[1] Her *kathā* practices bring to mind historian of religion Leela Prasad's claim that everyday storytelling, in the context of the Hindu communities with whom she worked in the South Indian town of Sringeri, not only "performs" ethical action and lived understandings of ethics, but also helps people to work out moral dilemmas and imagine what constitutes moral authority in transformative ways (Prasad 2007).

Guru Ma's rhetorical performances also direct attention to the sophisticated "ethical life" of her community and demonstrate that a guru and her devotees engage in the ethical practice of *dharm-kathā* in order to rethink the application of Hindu teachings and practices in a socially responsive manner and address contemporary issues and problems, such as environmental degradation. My use of "ethical life" draws on Pandian's and Ali's explication of the concept, which spotlights "the ways in which people practically engage themselves and their worlds as beings invested with moral potential" (2010, 3). Thus, Guru Ma's performances offer what historian of religion Rita D. Sherma has termed "a hermeneutic of engaged transformation"—meaning, Guru Ma's *kathās* advance an ethically responsible vision of social transformation for modern times, critique destructive behaviors, and "inspire action that protects the earth" (1998, 127). Guru Ma's ashram accomplishes tangible results of the environmental empathy she imparts to her community.

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[1] Guru Ma Bhuvneshwari Puri, interview by Antoinette E. DeNapoli, Rajasthan, India, November 4, 2013. The words that Guru Ma Bhuvneshwari Puri uses for "nature" and "environment" are *prakṛti* and *pariveś*, respectively.

Reconfiguring the dominant definitional parameters of *dharm* beyond the more conventional meanings of "rituals, customs, and traditions" articulated by her devotees to include in that malleable category environmental empathy allows Guru Ma to promote within her community, whom she often chastises for environmental apathy, a moral ecology founded on the understanding of *dharm* as an embodied emotion (cf. Jain 2011). According to Guru Ma, *dharm* has to be experienced from within the heart before it can be practiced ritually and socially in everyday life. In her words: "*Dharm* must come from inside. It cannot be learned. It cannot be reasoned. It has to emerge automatically. Give *dharm* a place in your heart." The emphasis she places on received cultural understandings of the "heart" and "feelings" to construct *dharm* suggests the power of emotion to evoke environmental empathy and stimulate new relationships of humanity to nature. Thus, in the moral ecology that Guru Ma "performs" for her community, the moral idiom of "feeling *dharm*" as opposed to "doing *dharm*" provokes ecological change and safeguards, as her *dharm-kathā* practices suggest, the "body" of nature, the moral "body" of Hindus, and the cosmic "body" of the planet.

In the following discussion, I contend that through performance Guru Ma affectively expands the standard meanings of *dharm* to include the idea of environmental empathy by aligning the emotional subjectivities of her audience with those that she attributes to nature and its ideal protector Ram, the hero featured in the epic *Rāmāyan* (cf. Dhand 2002; Jain 2011). Performing the "rhetoric of pain," she emphasizes that the moral sentiments of love (*prem*), mercy (*dayā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), forgiveness (*kṣamā*), and joy (*ānand*) represent the five "senses" (*indriyān*) of *dharm*, and the five "limbs" (*aṅg*) of empathy (*saṃvedanā*). According to the *kathā* teachings of Guru Ma, the actualization of these sentiments in humanity's everyday relationships with nature as a whole engenders ethical subjectivity and the Hindu moral "body." By foregrounding such emotional sensibilities to fashion both moral beings and moral communities, Guru Ma augments her claim of the interrelation of environmental empathy and *dharm*. For her, they are "the same." The complex of emotional impressions conveyed in connection with the notions that nature represents an empowered co-creator of life, an intelligent moral agent, and a "friend" (*mitra*) of humanity, whose actions are born of the five components of empathy, and whose agency is said to align with the common good and to exemplify the "real" moral, establishes the environmental empathy of *dharm*.

Apart from reimagining *dharm* as environmental empathy, I further suggest that Guru Ma's *kathās* cast light on the ways that performance creates a space for the kinds of theological innovations taking place within everyday Hinduisms in modern times. Although she associates her theology with Shankara's non-dual *Advaita Vedanta*, the theology Guru Ma teaches diverges from its classical parallel (Nelson 1998; Sherma 1998; Narayanan 2001). Her theology values material existence, viewing it as the sacred arena where Brahman manifests as the infinite and dynamic processes of becoming, rather than only as an eternal state of being or consciousness. In this context, divine becoming necessitates continuous expansion, movement, and change, which she says is life (*prān*)

and Brahman simultaneously. Taking my cue from Guru Ma, I suggest that her *Advaita Vedanta*-derived theology evidences, to use the concept developed by the late theologian Alfred North Whitehead (1978), a Hindu process-relational theology, by which I mean to articulate Guru Ma's view that all species in the cosmos not only exist as a single moral "body" within the expanding divine "body" of God (Nelson 1998), but as significantly, their capacity to "feel empathy" for each other creates a sense of mutual responsibility, accomplishes reciprocity, and makes *dharm* possible.

The "Experimental Hinduism" of Guru Ma's Dharm of Environmental Empathy

The Hindu-inspired environmental activity in which Guru Ma and her community are involved illuminates a phenomenon which I have described as "experimental Hinduism" (DeNapoli 2016 a, b). My application of experimental Hinduism builds upon the analytical models of "experimental religion" discussed by Patricia Ward (2009) in the context of 18th-century American Protestant Christianity and, more recently, by anthropologist John K. Nelson (2013) in his study of contemporary Japanese temple Buddhism. To paint a broad stroke, experimental religion describes the emphases that religions place on personal experience, experimentation, methodology, pragmatism, and beneficence (Nelson 2013). This concept envisions such processes as the dynamic and everyday means through which people process the social, political, and economic changes taking place around them and, by reconfiguring their religions, engage the challenges of modern life.

Citing the anthropologist Talal Asad, the sociologist of religion Meredith McGuire says that "we should not view religion as some 'transhistorical essence,' existing as a timeless and unitary phenomenon. As Asad and many others have demonstrated, not only do religions change over time but also what people understand to be 'religion' changes" (2008, 5). Guru Ma's *kathā* practices and the environmental ethics she constructs through them support this idea. Her recasting Hinduism as environmental empathy brings into focus the changing meanings of "religion," "religious tradition," and "religious identity" as Guru Ma and her community engage social change and, using the resources of the Hindu traditions, come up with workable solutions to modern problems. Speaking about the impact of social change on Buddhism, the historian of religion George Tanabe Jr. has said that "As well as an ancient religion, Buddhism is a modern phenomenon...Rising to the challenges of modernization, [Buddhist movements] have developed a creative set of interpretations and strategies that constitute what one of its early pioneers called 'Humanistic Buddhism'" (2004).[2]

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[2] George Tanabe Jr. wrote these words in his Series Editor Preface to Stuart Chandler's monograph, *Establishing a Pure Land on Earth: The Foguang Buddhist Perspective on Modernization and Globalization* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004). A number of scholars of Buddhism, including David McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), Susan Darlington, *The Ordination of a Tree: The Thai*

Guru Ma's experimental Hinduism compares to Humanistic Buddhism in that both cultural phenomena have come into formation from the interpretive innovations brought about by prioritizing "people and their needs" rather than "the maintenance of tradition" (Tanabe Jr. 2004). As the work of historian of religion Pankaj Jain (2011) shows in the context of the sustainability ethos of the "*dharma* communities" with whom he conducted research in North India, Hindus, and others, throughout history have creatively reinterpreted *dharm* on the basis of environmental challenges in order to benefit life. Constructing *dharm* through the frame environmental empathy by means of *kathā*, Guru Ma similarly draws on a traditional Hindu idea to focus her devotees' activities on engaging this world, and this life, in a new way—that is, to understand that *dharm* involves "feeling" the perceived pain of nature *as if* it were their own, and to make that affective experience the subjective ground from which they interact with and restore the natural environment, whose well-being, health, and happiness signifies that of the larger Hindu moral community which Guru Ma imagines and creates in her *kathās*. Her experimental Hinduism accentuates the unique kind of modern *dharm* that performance materializes in an attempt to answer questions that are especially pertinent to the ecological and technological transformations illustrative of the 21st-century milieu.[3]

To echo Tanabe Jr.'s insights, Hinduism is both an ancient religion and a modern phenomenon. Its transmission throughout the millennia in South Asia and beyond constitutes the creative outpouring of individuals and communities who have reimagined and reinvented that tradition's shifting definitional parameters in light of the myriad historical conditions in which they lived and fashioned their everyday lives and worlds. The scholar of Buddhism David McMahan reminds us that "The historian of religion, qua historian, should not merely recapitulate sectarian or even canonical rhetorics of authenticity but examine what practitioners *do* with the texts and other elements of the tradition. The reconfiguration of traditional doctrine and practice in response to novel historical circumstances is the norm in the development of religions...This dynamic process of tradition-in-change establishes what Buddhism *is* empirically" (2008, 179, italics in original). My use of "experimental Hinduism" to draw attention to Guru Ma's performing *dharm* as environmental empathy in a critical moment of the Anthropocene (Thiele 2011), and to show what Hinduism *is* empirically at a specific time and place, builds on McMahan's notion of "tradition-in-change" and accents the creative interpretations she develops and the rhetorical techniques she uses to reshape *dharm* in order to ensure that the Hindu traditions persist and flourish in and through modernity.

Buddhist Environmental Movement (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), and John K. Nelson, *Experimental Buddhism: Innovation and Activism in Contemporary Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2013), have since echoed and reinforced Tanabe Jr.'s prescient observations.

[3] I am thankful to my University of Wyoming colleague, Paul Flesher, for helping me to work out this idea.

Setting the Stage: Methods, Research Contexts, and Organization

In the year of 2013-2014, I conducted ten months of ethnographic research in India on the topic of *sannyās* and social change in everyday Hinduisms. I worked closely with fifty *sādhus* who resided in the North Indian states of Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. Guru Ma is one of these *sādhus*. While she is not the only *sādhu* I know who is reconfiguring the definitional parameters of *dharm* through activist forms of engagement, she is the only *sādhu* in my research sample who is reimagining *dharm* as the practice of environmental empathy and is working to educate people about India's serious environmental problems. Her stories, which I document and analyze below, are drawn from two specific *kathā* events that ran between 2013 and 2014. These are the *Sharad Poornima* (Autumnal Equinox) *kathā*, which occurred at Guru Ma's ashram in Udaipur district, Rajasthan, on the evening of October 18, 2013, and an extended twelve-day *kathā* program, which took place in the industrialized Union Territory of Silwasa, in the city of Dadara aur Nagar Haveli, between late January and early February in the year 2014, and which ran every day, between three and four hours a day, beginning in the early afternoon. During this time, I travelled with Guru Ma and three of her devotees, two women and one man, from Udaipur to Silwasa, and back, staying in the guest home of a local female magistrate, and recorded the entire program with Guru Ma's permission. In the summer of 2015, I returned to India and spent a month visiting with Guru Ma in order to clarify points from the previous research year and I include conversations and stories from those meetings.

The two main *kathā* events I analyze demonstrate the overlapping pedagogical dimensions of Guru Ma's rhetorical practices and the communities whom she teaches and transforms through them. On the one hand, *kathās* like the one which took place on the holy day of *Sharad Poornima* are organized by Guru Ma and held at her ashram specifically for her Udaipur community, which has three thousand members. The topics around which she structures these kinds of *kathā* address a range of contemporary issues related to the everyday economic and social lives of its members.

More specifically, Guru Ma's Udaipur community consists of primarily well-educated professionals, men and women, working in the fields of science, biotechnology, engineering, math, law, and social work, as well as business owners and managers of industries. One of Guru Ma's female devotees, who often travels in India with Guru Ma for the duration of her *kathā* programs, serves in a distinguished position of social leadership within her local village as the *sarpanch*, or head of the village judicial council that arbitrates on a variety of matters, and has two master's degrees.

For the most part, Guru Ma leads a prosperous Hindu community consisting of primarily Marwari and Mewari language speakers, though people communicate in a mixture of Rajasthani and Hindi languages. Her community's members come mostly from middle class and upper-caste backgrounds. As we will see, Guru Ma performs *kathā* as an

effective rhetorical means to teach this particular group about the ecological dangers of overconsumption—she chastises these devotees for their increasing accumulation of fancy cars, clothes, apartments, and household gadgets—and its moral responsibility to reduce its environmental impact on the earth and develop "eco-friendly"[4] lifestyle habits and practices that work to preserve, protect, and conserve the natural environment.

By contrast, *kathās* like the Silwasa event are organized and sponsored by the leaders of regional and, in some cases, national religious trusts that operate as one of the many emerging non-profit organizations in India. One of the organizers of Guru Ma's Silwasa *kathā*, Avtar Singh, a founding member of a trust that he and ten other board members help to run, is her devotee and, with the board's support, invited her to come to the city of Dadara aur Nagar Haveli and give a twelve-day *kathā* program. Originally from Marwar, Rajasthan, he owns three hardware and electrical supply businesses in Silwasa (and, as indicated by various placards displayed on the walls, he has received local awards recognizing his businesses as the "best" in town) and lives with his wife and two children in a fancy high rise apartment complex, which offers twenty-four hour security for its residents. He managed Guru Ma's entire stay in Silwasa, driving her to and from the *kathā* location every day, setting up her personal meetings with Silwasa devotees and leaders of other trusts and, in the company of his family, taking Guru Ma to the nearby pilgrimage city of Nashik, situated in the foothills of the western Ghats mountain range in Maharashtra state, for a day tour before and after the *kathā* event. The temple complex where the *kathā* occurred was built with the funds raised by Avtar Singh's trust and it employs two priests who serve the local Marwari community of Silwasa.

Importantly, events such as the Guru Ma's Silwasa *kathā*, while organized by local Marwaris, function as open, public gatherings and attract people from across the caste, class, gender, age, and linguistic spectrum.[5] The numbers of people, individuals and families, who attend Guru Ma's *kathās* can be quite substantial, as I witnessed on the last day of the Silwasa program, during which several thousand people turned out for the event. What is more, a local news station, catching wind of the massive gathering and featuring its last day of activities on a local media channel, stimulated both public interest in and attendance at the event. These types of public *kathās* have the potential to reach communities beyond the mostly educated, middle class Marwaris whom Guru Ma leads. They also make it possible for her to speak about contemporary social problems, such as environmental despoliation, which cut across class and caste divisions and affect the lives

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[4] Guru Ma Bhuvneshwari Puri uses this term in her *kathās*.

[5] At the Silwasa *kathā*, I learned that Indians speaking Marathi, Gujarati, Hindi, and Marwari attended the event. Guru Ma's Silwasa *dharm-kathā*, held between January 26 and February 6, 2014.

of all Indians, and help to raise on a large scale awareness about attitudes and behaviors that only contribute to the problem.

Religious Journeying as a Catalyst for Environmental Empathy: Guru Ma's Dharm-Kathās

The first time I made contact with Guru Ma, she was speaking to me on her mobile phone and riding as a passenger on a devotee's motorcycle as they made their way through the loud streets of Udaipur city. The sound of vehicles' horns punctuated our talk. She was busy making preparations for the multiple religious programs coming up at her ashram and, excited to learn more about my research on *sannyās* and social change, invited me to come and meet her there in a couple of days. On the day of our first meeting in September of 2013, there were a handful of devotees at the ashram. Guru Ma settled in that ashram in the summer of 2013 and, with the help of her devotees, had been living in the region only for a few months before our meeting. The devotees convinced Guru Ma to make Udaipur her new home and the ashram subsists through their donations. They also help Guru Ma in the planning and running of events tailored for adults and children which occur at her ashram, named Shree Kulam Ashram. It is a peaceful and joyful place.

As she came to meet me in the courtyard of the ashram, accompanied by her dog Roti Ram, a yellow domestic mix, her face held a big, warm smile and her whole comportment, from her cheerful words of greeting to the thoughtful way she inquired of my health, living arrangements, and research program, suggested the importance she places on teaching in her practice of *sannyās* and the energy she gives to building relationships with people and communities. While sitting in the shade of the courtyard drinking tea made with herbs from the garden, Guru Ma shared details about her life.

A twenty-seven old *sādhu* (2013), Guru Ma renounced at the age of six years old and received her initiation from the Puri lineage of the Dashanami tradition, which consists of ten orders, only four of which admit women, and is one of the two dominant pan-Indian Shaiva renouncer institutions in India. Her initiation name is Bhuvneshwari Puri, but her devotees affectionately call her Guru Ma.[6] She took initiation from her guru, Shree Dayanand Puriji, and divided her time between her natal home and her guru's ashram. At first, her parents resisted her decision, but the combination of her obstinacy (in one of our conversations Guru Ma called herself "ziddi," meaning, "stubborn," "obstinate," and "persistent") and her strong disinterest in householding activities finally convinced them that they could not deter Guru Ma from the path on which she had permanently embarked. She told them, "Do whatever you want but don't involve me in your work [*kām*]." The compelling sense of detachment she also experienced "since birth" proved no match for her parent's persistent pleas to remain a householder. At six years old, Guru Ma began studying Hindu *dharm*, including Ayurved, yog, and meditation. By the age of

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[6] Following their lead, I, too, will refer to Bhuvneshwari Puri as Guru Ma in this article.

eleven, she left her home and began to live independently in the jungles of northern India among the Bhils, learning their lifeways, particularly their medicinal healing practices, and developing her own spiritual practice (*sādhan*).

Guru Ma spent six years practicing *sannyās* in the jungle and completed two Master's degrees in social work and human rights from a state university. She has also studied Hindi translations of sacred texts, like the *Vedas*, *Upaniṣads*, *Bhagavad Gītā*, *Mahābhārat*, *Purāns*, *Srimad Bhāgavatam*, and the vernacular songs and stories attributed to the north Indian *bhakti* saints. Her *dharm-kathās* evidence the breath of Guru Ma's intimate knowledge of Hindu textual and oral traditions. In 2014, she began studying conversational Sanskrit with a teacher from a Bhil community. Every morning he would arrive at her ashram and run through two hours of lessons with Guru Ma, before returning back to his village in Udaipur district. She also had plans to complete a Ph.D. in life science studies and examine Hindu texts and rituals from a scientific perspective, but her increasing social activism and humanitarian work in India has caused her to put that aspiration on hold. While she understands English, Guru Ma is not comfortable speaking in the language. Thus, we spoke in Hindi, and occasionally she used English words and phrases (like "eco-friendly") to communicate her ideas.

Journeying throughout North India for the purpose of giving *dharm-kathās* catalyzed Guru Ma's realization of the severity of the region's environmental damage that was plainly evident in the rampant water and air pollution and the ground pollution caused by widespread garbage and waste accumulation. Having spent a significant period of her life practicing spiritual discipline in the jungles of North India and living among the Bhils, who organize their everyday worlds around an ideology of reverence for the powerful world of nature that is seen to contain God (cf. Jain 2011), Guru Ma had not thought much about India's environmental problems. However, as she began her travels across the subcontinent, she became painfully aware of what she calls the "artificial" urban Indian landscape and its desecration of the natural environment. Rapid industrial growth and, since the 21st century, massive commercial and residential development that stemmed from an emerging neoliberal Indian economy, had, to her mind, severed humans' "right" relationship with nature and contributed to its objectification as a lifeless material resource that is to be used for human benefit.

But what disturbed Guru Ma the most had to do with what she perceived to be the extreme environmental despoliation occurring at India's most sacred Hindu pilgrimage sites (*tīrths*) and places of ritual worship. To find environmental problems in overcrowded India cities concerned Guru Ma and pushed her to think seriously about the environment. But to encounter such issues in well-known living contexts of Hindu *dharm* befuddled her. Perhaps of all the places in India's modern topography, she had expected the *tīrths* and their temples to be culturally sanctioned loci of nature's conservation, preservation, and protection—that is, to be dharmic spheres in which the ethic of environmental empathy is readily actualized. Instead, what she found instanced some of India's worst

environmental atrocities. The many ways that she observed Hindus across the caste and class continuum disrespect and violate nature in those dharmic contexts ran contrary to what she believes *dharm* to mean and how it should be lived. Similarly, the scenery she beheld there contradicted the pristine image of nature that she had constructed in her mind after years of reading the sacred texts. In the context of the Silwasa *dharm-kathā* she gave on the third day of the event, Guru Ma says,

> When you hear the stories of *Bhāgvat,*[7] you'll imagine a beautiful place. But the truth is, if you go there, I'm telling you, we cannot see the truth from the stories, because if we compare the truth from the stories [with the everyday reality of what we see at the *tīrths*] our souls will die. Your heart will break. The juice [*ras*] of the *kathā* will become tasteless. I'm sitting here not to do a sweet [*madhur*] *kathā*. I'm not doing a sweet *kathā*. I'm here to tell you the truth. Today's truth is that it's not easy to breathe properly at the *tīrths*. If you bathe in the water there, your skin will suffer horribly. You will find garbage everywhere. Mathura [a sacred *tīrth*] also has the same situation. This is the situation in Vrindavan, Kashi, and Haridwar. This is the situation in Ujjain. It's the same in Dwarka, too. It's everywhere!

In this segment of her *kathā*, Guru Ma speaks about the *Bhāgvat Purān*'s "beautiful" depiction of the world of nature. The moral significance of her narrative lies in the embedded understanding on Guru Ma's part, at least, of the inherent divinity of the world of nature as conceived by this Hindu text. Historian of religion David L. Haberman explains that "[t]he identification of the world of nature with divinity is pervasive in much Hindu theology, but perhaps no scripture states this more directly than the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Therein we read that the entire visible world is the body of God, here known as Kṛṣṇā…The trees…are the hair on his body, the mountains his bones, and the rivers his veins and arteries" (Haberman 2002, 340; cf. Narayanan 2001; Nelson 1998).

Invoking the *Bhāgavat Purān*, Guru Ma tacitly establishes the notion that the Indian natural landscape embodies a divine Hindu symbolic and that environmental degradation amounts to destroying God's own body. Her provocative comments that "our souls will die" and "Your heart will break" articulated in the context of the disjuncture she establishes between the *Bhāgvat*'s idyllic representation of the natural world and its poor condition in modern times suggest Guru Ma's recognition that environmental damage hurts God and destroys *dharm*. She signals these ideas in the same *kathā* when she talks about going to visit Panchvati (literally, "a grove of five trees") for the first time just two days before the start of the twelve-day Silwasa *kathā* program. Located in Nashik, Maharashtra, Panchvati is said to be an area of the forest where the exemplars of *dharm* in the epic *Rāmāyan* story, and incarnate deities, Ram and Sita, lived during Ram's fourteen-year banishment from Ayodhya kingdom. It is specifically thought to have been

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[7] The term "Bhāgvat" refers to the *Srimad Bhāgavatam* or, as is said in Hindi, the *Bhāgavat Purān*.

the spot of Ram's and Sita's hut, which was built by Ram's brother Lakshman and contained five sacred trees. Here is her story:

> A few days ago I went to visit Panchvati? When I went there I became so upset that tears poured from my eyes. When I stood there I felt very bad. I said, "This is not Panchvati." Didn't I say that Avtar Singhji? He told me four or five times, "This is Panchvati only." I said there must be some misunderstanding. "This is not the real Panchvati." He said, "No, no, this is the real Panchvati. We have come here so many times." Still, I didn't believe him. I asked the people nearby. I said, "Is this Panchvati?" They said, "Yes." Was anyone here surprised by seeing Panchvati? No one! Did it come into your mind, "Is this Panchvati?"

> When I read the texts, I experience [*anubhav karnā*] what I read. I create a picture in my mind while reading. So, what did I imagine about Panchvati? There should be a forest surrounding Panchvati. God [Bhagvan] created this deep forest and that's why it's called Panchvati. We also call it Panchvati because Lord Ram planted five trees of Neem [Azadirachta indica], Ashok [saroca asoca], Amla [phyllanthus emblica], Bael [Aegle Marmolos], and Peepal [ficus religiosa] with his own hands. Panchvati means "five trees."

> This is how I imagined Panchvati... But now, what will you see? There is no forest anymore. There are no trees. You can only see big, big buildings. Houses are everywhere. Sewage [*khīcar*] flows from all sides. It's absolutely dirty [*gandā*]. You'll find garbage everywhere...It's written in the *Rāmāyan* that Sita lives in a hut...But an artificial cave has been made. It's not in the *Rāmāyan* that Sita lived in a cave. It is written that she lived in a hut. The cave where you are doing the *darśan* [sacred viewing] is artificial. It's not original. It's a cement cave. But in the text, there was a hut that Lakshman made. He made it with his own hands from grass and wood. And the five trees were planted closely together. Now, they are not even in the same area...It's not possible anymore to do the circumambulation of the trees, because two houses have been built next to two of the trees. The walls of those houses touch the trees, so you can't circumambulate them, and sewage flows between the trees. It smells so bad over there. Just to touch the trees you have to get yourself dirty. Did you ever think that we have temples and places of *dharm* [*dharm ke stān*] like this?

Guru Ma's cognitive dissonance is palpable. Not only is Panchvati unrecognizable to her, but her performance also cues that Ram, Sita, and Lakshman would not recognize it either. Perhaps their hearts would break and tears would "pour down" from their eyes when they see that the "thick" jungle where they once had lived in harmony with nature and sustained themselves with its resources has been completely destroyed, that the "original" five trees Ram had planted "with his own hands" are now gone, and that the hut Lakshman had built for Sita out of "grass and wood" has now been replaced by an

"artificial" cave. The story she performs evokes the feeling that divinity incarnated in the forms of Ram, Sita, and Lakshman, or the divine more generally, would experience great emotional and physical distress at the sight of nature's desecration. Her telling certainly makes clear that Guru Ma is devastated by what she sees at Panchvati *tīrth*. She cannot accept the idea that the Panchvati she is standing in is, in fact, the "real" Panchvati that she has read about in the *Rāmāyan*. Dismayed, she has to ask her host, Avtar Singh, and other passersby, several times, "Is this the real Panchvati," because the shock from what she discovers proves too much for Guru Ma to handle.

"Nature's pain breaks your heart": The Rhetoric of Pain in Constructions of the Moral

Thus, woven throughout her narratives is what I characterize as the "rhetoric of pain." It is safe to say that Guru Ma's environmental activism was born of the intense sorrow she felt in reaction to the environmental degradation that she has witnessed at "places of *dharm*," which she says is happening "everywhere." Her story makes clear that environmental despoliation in dharmic contexts has become the norm rather than the exception in modern times, and for Guru Ma this realization is difficult to bear. It breaks her heart. She emphasizes that she "felt very bad" (*bahut dukh huā*) and became "so upset" (*itnā dukh huā*) during her visit to Panchvati that the strong emotions she felt "poured out" in the tears she cried. Guru Ma's release of emotions narratively signifies that her own soul (*ātmā*) cries out in pain. The Hindi word she uses to articulate her intense feelings and emotions is "*dukh*" (*dukh honā*). It variously translates as "suffering," "sorrow," "grief," "pain," "distress," and "affliction."[8] The emotion-laden moral idioms of "suffering pain" or "feeling upset" frame Guru Ma's *kathā* narratives and illustrate an effective rhetorical technique for constructing an ethic of environmental empathy that she believes to represent her idea of the moral Hindu.

Although the rhetoric of feeling pain and suffering over nature's destruction featured in Guru Ma's narrative telling identifies her own personal and private emotions, I suggest that they signify more than individualized and interior psychological states of mind. Rather, her rhetoric of pain demonstrates an "emotion discourse" that works in public *kathā* contexts to create and evoke the moral dispositions, sentiments, and feelings that, in the view of her theology, make possible the cultivation of ethical Hindu selfhood in everyday Hinduisms (Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990).

Studies in the anthropology on emotion can shed some light on the evocative possibilities of Guru Ma's performing a rhetoric of pain to craft *dharm* as environmental empathy. Since this field of scholarly study is wide and diverse, I spend some time discussing particularly performance and discourse-centered explanatory models of emotion rhetoric

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[8] See R.S. McGregor, ed., *Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 502.

that inform my analysis of Guru Ma's moral performances. One key piece of scholarship in this area concerns the anthology edited by anthropologists Catherine A. Lutz and Lila Abu-Lughod (1990, 1-23). Their volume has shown that emotion discourses, or, to use the language of their analytic, "emotion talk," as featured across cultural contexts, represent culturally-specific social practices that help to constitute shared notions of power, emotion, meaning, and social life. Challenging the dominant western psychological and biomedical models, according to which "emotions are things internal, irrational, and natural" (2), Lutz and Abu-Lughod examine four sociocultural analytic strategies[9] in anthropological studies on emotion that have been applied and critiqued by the contributors to their edited volume and contend that emotion discourse is inherently dialogical and fundamentally social. The contributions featured in their volume work off of the common presupposition that emotions "do" things by virtue of not so much representing social worlds as creating them (Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990).

In her chapter on the gendering of emotion in American culture, Lutz, for example, has described emotion discourse as an "active motivator" that shapes collective moral understandings. In the same volume, Geoffrey White has said about the men with whom he worked in the Soloman Islands that their rhetoric of emotions not only gives expression to a vernacular "moral idiom," but also brings about the transformation of socioemotional realities (1990, 47). According to White, "To talk about or express emotion in context is to expect to evoke a certain type of response in both the self and the listening other" (Ibid, 64). Expanding on White's idea on the evocative functions of emotion discourse, Donald Brennis, who has conducted anthropological fieldwork with Indians in Fiji, has demonstrated the relational dimensions of affective speech in everyday talk and its capacity to engender culturally valuable social experiences. He has said that "'feelings' often provide a social rather than an individual idiom, a way of commenting not so much on oneself as on oneself in relation to others" (1990, 113). The interactional model of emotion discourse that Brennis develops in his analysis calls attention to the ways in which "language is expressive, affecting, and constitutive, displaying a speaker's state and influencing to some degree that of his or her audience" (1990, 115).

More recently, the work of postcolonial theorist Sara Ahmed (2004) contributes to the dynamic field of anthropological debate about the relationship between emotions and social life by illuminating the discursive power of affective speech to "align some subjects with some others and against some others" (2004, 25). Approaching emotions as constructive and multivocal cultural signs that "move" people through the intensity of the attachments and impressions created by bodily others, Ahmed suggests that "emotions play a crucial role in the 'surfacing' of individual and collective bodies" (Ibid) and that

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[9] The strategies these scholars discuss have to do with those they classify as: "essentializing," "relativizing," "historicizing," and "contextualizing." See Lutz and Abu-Lughod, "Introduction: emotion, discourse, and the politics of everyday life," in *Language and the politics of Emotion*, ed. Catherine A. Lutz and Lila Abu-Lughod (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 1-23.

"feelings make 'the collective' appear *as if* it were a body in the first place" (27; italics in original). Drawing on the anecdote of feeling physical pain, such as pricking one's finger, to illustrate how the collective takes shape by means of intense feelings, Ahmed says,

> It is through experiences such as pain that we come to have a sense of our skin as bodily surface, as something that keeps us apart from others, but as something that 'mediates' the relationships between external and internal, or inside and outside...To be more precise, *the impression of a surface is an effect of such intensification of feeling*...It is through the intensification of feeling that bodies and worlds materialize and take shape, or that the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface is produced. Feelings are not about the inside getting out or the outside getting in, but that they 'affect' the very distinction of inside and outside in the first place (Ahmed 2004, 29; italics in original).

Against this conceptual backdrop, I suggest that Guru Ma's "emotion talk" is constructive. The rhetoric of pain she crafts in relation to nature shows that the moral is performative. Her emotion discourse "affects" the very distinction between the "real" and the "artificial" Panchvati so that these concepts operate as competing motifs that signify the contrast between the moral and the immoral; *dharm* and *adharm*, respectively. Her affective speech performatively locates environmental empathy within the moral while associating environmental destruction with the immoral.

Guru Ma's rhetoric of pain acts as a powerful motivator in raising the environmental awareness of her audience and shifting dominant perceptions about what "real" *dharm* means and how environmental empathy is relevant to modern understandings of *dharm*. Her rhetoric articulates a poignant commentary on her own perception that there is something wrong with people's understanding and practice of *dharm* in modern times, because they are not taking care of nature in the way that she imagines "real" Hindus ought to take care of it. Her feelings spring from the recognition that human-nature relations have gone awry. She says that "*dharm* means that people "should live in a good way with nature," but because the situation at the *tīrths* indicates otherwise, she feels that "humans have gone far from God." Her performance brings to light what Guru Ma calls "the bitter truth" with respect to her perception of people's environmental "sins" (*pāp*). In this way, she reformulates *dharm* from within the context of environmental empathy and, by means of the rhetoric of pain, reconstitutes a moral community that aligns with her environmental ethics.

Her rhetoric of pain is performatively compelling because it is meant to evoke a response from the audience. The rhetorical intention behind her emotion talk lies primarily in its power to transform *how* Hindus *feel* about and relate to the world of nature, rather than only what they think about it. As Ahmed emphasizes, "...how we feel about others is what aligns us with a collective, which paradoxically 'takes shape' only as an effect of such alignments" (2004, 27). Many of the Hindus attending Guru Ma's *kathā* program would

probably agree that nature is sacred and should be protected and revered. By the same token, they would also probably agree that destroying nature is immoral and equivalent to hurting the divine Absolute and harming *dharm*. But that does not mean that they will feel compelled to take care of nature. Historian of religion Vasudha Narayanan describes this irony well in her statement that despite the nature reverence found in the Hindu sacred texts, "Hindus of every stripe have participated in polluting the environment" (2001, 181).

Guru Ma seems to understand that, while important, it is not enough for her to say that Hinduism reveres nature, or quote texts that promote such claims, or even prescribe non-violence toward nature. She appears to accept what India scholar Ruth Vanita says in the context of mainstream Hindu cultural practice: "Hindus do not follow rules. They follow custom (2016)." Since, according to her stories, it has become customary for Hindus "of every stripe" to abuse nature, Guru Ma knows that changing their relationship to it requires affectively "moving" them to experience nature in the ways she does and, through emotional impressions, fashion the collective moral "body" of Hindus for whom nature's "body" is felt and treated as if it were that same Hindu body. She often says that Hindus practice *dharm* from "outside," rather than from "inside," by which she means that they have not taken *dharm* inside of their "hearts." She suggests that people will not invest themselves in environmental care if they do not feel deeply connected to the world of nature.

Therefore, her rhetoric affectively evokes empathy for nature even as it constructs *dharm* as environmental empathy. Guru Ma spends a lot of time speaking about the importance of "feeling" empathy for nature; the Hindi word she uses in her *kathās* is *saṃvedanā*.[10] An anecdote Guru Ma gives to teach about the sentience of nature will help to place her understanding of *saṃvedanā* in the specific linguistic contexts in which she deploys that term. Using the example of a finger that has been pierced by a thorn, Guru Ma says that, while the individual body parts appear to be different from each other, the sensation of the pain of a single finger brings into a person's awareness the realization of having "one body." She says, "Until that thorn comes out of my finger, I will not have peace of mind; I will leave all my work, I'll not eat or do any rituals. Why? Because this is my finger. I

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[10] The *Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary* edited by R.S. McGregor (1993) translates "samvedana" as "sympathy" (969). It is the only translation this dictionary gives for this term. In the context of describing *dharm* as an emotion (*bhāv*) which has to be felt "in the heart" so that, as Guru Ma says, "true" *dharm* can be understood, Guru Ma uses the term *saṃvedanā*" to mean the emotional sensitivity that people must have to be able to understand the feelings and emotions of others. When my research associate, Vanita Ojha, and I began working on transcriptions of my interviews with Guru Ma, we agreed that the term "empathy" makes for a more accurate translation of *saṃvedanā* than "sympathy" and conveys Guru Ma's understanding that *saṃvedanā* involves the capacity to feel the emotions and feelings that she ascribes to the world of nature as if they were one's own.

thought it was separate from me. But actually, it is all one body." Guru Ma's finger anecdote not only parallels Ahmed's example of pricking one's finger, but also resonates with Ahmed's theory that the "intensification of feelings" evoked by that experience creates a collectivity, and in Guru Ma's case, the experience of having "one body." Through this frame, Guru Ma teaches that nature, too, represents one of the many material "senses" (*indriyān*) of the divine body of God, and that while it may appear to be separate from humans, she emphasizes that "it is all one life." Constructing nature as the sensory apparatus of God establishes the sentience of nature as a whole and its moral power.

But there is more to the rhetorical efficacy of Guru Ma's story. While her anecdote conveys that notion that nature "feels" pain and suffering (i.e., nature is sentient), Guru Ma also wants people to be able to imagine the pain that nature is said to feel as if it were their own bodily pain. Her rhetorical performances intend to affect such an emotional impressions in/for her audience. She says, "We appear different but we are not. We're really all the same life [*prān*]. If you have pain, nature has that pain; God has that pain. If my finger feels pain, then we all feel that [same] pain." Because Guru Ma's rhetoric of pain seeks to change people's relationship to nature by evoking the understanding that nature's imagined pain is akin to human experiences and sensations of pain, I suggest that Guru Ma's use of *saṃvedanā* communicates the idea of empathy—i.e., the capacity to imagine and understand another's feelings and experiences—and employ this translation of the term.

We may say that Guru Ma's emotion speech contrasts the moral feelings of empathy from the immoral feelings of apathy in constructions of ethical selfhood. From her perspective, apathy describes the dominant mental landscape of the majority of the middle class and upper-caste Hindus whom she teaches in her *kathās* and represents the biggest obstacle to this particular community's practice of environmental ethics. By contrast, feeling empathy for nature not only distinguishes moral Hindus from their immoral counterparts, but also aligns the former with the larger imagined moral Hindu collectivity. The capacity to feel empathy identifies a fundamental moral virtue and disposition in Guru Ma's vision of ethical selfhood. It also fosters the cultivation of the dharmic sensibilities of mercy, compassion, love, joy, and forgiveness that she associates with environmental ethics. According to Guru Ma, environmental care generates these virtues in everyday practices of life and, as she suggests, increases people's moral capacity to experience empathy for the world of nature. By empathizing with nature, a person is more likely to feel an attachment to it and, by implication, compelled to take care of it. By contrast, the lack of empathy, or apathy, for nature severs feelings of attachment to it and, as a result, interferes with the practice of environmental care.

The performative significance of her using the word empathy is that it encourages a set of symbolic associations between humans and the non-human natural world based on the theological view that they are more alike than they are different. Equally important is

that those symbolic associations make possible humans' imaginative identification with nature in a manner that heightens the urgency of environmental care in the current milieu. Guru Ma says that humans and nature "share" the same divine 'DNA,' and by this account, feeling empathy for nature drives her everyday environmental ethics. While she does not say that nature and humans are the same, she suggests that nature possesses experiential, sensory, and feeling capacities that are similar to those of humans and, hence, deserves to be seen and treated with respect, love, compassion, and kindness.

"We have to love nature in a real way": Affecting the Dharm of Environmental Empathy

It is no coincidence, then, that Guru Ma calls her teaching events "dharm-kathās." In the *kathās* I have seen her give, on the first day of the event she frames the performance by telling the audience, "What you people typically think of *dharm* is not *dharm*." Pausing the teaching, she gauges their response to this bold proclamation. Her statement is purposefully provocative for a reason. By grabbing the audience's attention, it cues an understanding of *dharm* beyond that of "customs" and "rituals" with which, according to Guru Ma, most members of her audience associate that concept. She takes this opportunity to carve out an alternative interpretive space for *dharm* by distinguishing it from the terms "upasana," "mat," and "riti-rivaz," for example, which denote "rituals," "traditions," and "customs," respectively, and which are commonly and, according to Guru Ma, erroneously conflated with *dharm*. She says, "These are not *dharm*. They are just a part [*hissā*] of *dharm*."

As Guru Ma unpacks her idea of *dharm*, she employs two rhetorical techniques. First, she emphasizes that *dharm* "never stops in one place. It moves and keeps moving forward" and "sustains the world." In her theology, the world of nature holds incredible moral value by virtue of the fact that all lifeworlds engage themselves in the common *dharm* of "moving life forward." She says,

> What is the *dharm* of life? Think of the seed [*bīj*]. What is the *dharm* of a seed? To increase. The seed keeps increasing itself. It keeps moving and growing. The tree's *dharm* is to give a seed. And the *dharm* of a seed is to produce new trees. Humans are also a seed. See, this is also a debt. You have to move forward. The whole world is involved in this work. You can see that a small flower is busy in in producing the next generation of life [*prān*]. This is the nature of humans, the earth, and the universe. From the one sun, the planets were born. It is in the nature of the universe to keep reproducing. The *ṛsis* said you have a debt on you. 'Obtain a child and after that, do whatever you want to do.' This is about the father's debt. Now, if *sannyāsīs* choose not to marry, not to have children, now they have the earth's debt on their head. It means that they haven't passed anything on. Nothing moves forward.

But look at the great scientists, great artists, and great scholars of the world. Many [of them] don't have children. Look at the great *sādhus* and *sannyāsīs*. All of them have passed something on to the world, they have passed something on to the society. Whatever power they have, they put it into their work. They have also given something to this earth. You can't leave this world without giving. Why? Because you have taken something from it. Every person gives according to his [or her] level. Someone gives a seed [i.e., reproduces a form of life]. Someone gives an idea. All these people, whether scientists, artists, or *sādhus*, have not obtained a child but they live happily in this world and are satisfied in their lives. Their work moves them forward and moves the world forward. Everyone must leave his [or her] mark in the world...Whether the person is a *ṛṣi*, a *sannyāsī*, or a householder, he [or she] must give something to the world so that it can move forward. This is the *dharm* of life.

Guru Ma foregrounds the view that *dharm* exists through means of the flourishing of life—meaning, that life "moves and keeps moving forward." The ancient agricultural metaphor of the seed invoked by Guru Ma signifies the power of life. It works well to communicate her point that the infinitely creative potential of life establishes the intrinsic moral value and promise of nature as a whole. By "giving back" a seed to the earth, nature acts righteously and for the common good of all. Hence, the moral value that Guru Ma tacitly attributes to nature arises from its *dharm* of participating in life flourishing. She talks about nature with respect to flowers, birds, animals, and humans and the "seeds" they contribute to life by reproducing "the next generation." The seed metaphor, after all, signifies in classical Hindu texts and vernacular ritual traditions the procreative capacity of nature, connoting the powerful fecundity of the land and its participants, as well as the generative cycles of growth and decay necessary for life's continuity (Doniger and Smith 1991; Flueckiger 1996).

At the same time, the seed metaphor that Guru Ma invokes in her narrative also works to represent nature, along with humans, as an equal co-creator in the genesis of life. In the 2013 *Sharad Poornima kathā* she gave, Guru Ma talks about the abundant co-creative power of nature. She says,

There is only the importance of life [*prān kā hi to mahatvā hai*]. Can anything exist without life? Life is everywhere. Life is so creative. Life is so precious. Whenever there is a Vedic *yajñā* [sacrifice], we make offerings to life. There are so many Vedic gods, but among them, the god of life [*prān-devtā*] is chief. All our offerings are to continue the power of life in the world. In our texts, it is said to worship life only. Just worship life. It is the form of Brahman. If God [Ishwar] comes from somewhere, then life is the means by which God comes. So, why is life so important? Because it is the foundation of all existence, and, well, because people love life...We are worshipping Shivji, Ramji, Krishnaji, Bhagvanji [Vishnu], and Mataji. We are worshipping all the gods. But, in reality, what we are doing by

worshipping all the gods is worshipping life. You are not worshipping anything other than life. And that life will always have different, different forms...Life is the biggest evidence in the whole universe for God's [Ishwar's] existence. If we say God exists, it's because life exists. Life creates, and we are a part of life. Without life, we cannot exist; we cannot experience God. Can we know God without life on earth? This earth is life. These plants, trees, shrubs, what are they? Life. What are you? Life. What is God [Ishwar]? Life.

It is significant that when Guru Ma talks about "the world" she does not use the term *sansār*. In renunciant conceptual frameworks, the idea of *sansār* carries negative overtones and signifies the impermanent and illusory (i.e., "false") realm of existence, where death, pain, and suffering menacingly await to drag the soul through endless rounds of rebirth. *Sansār* derives from a verbal root that means "to wander," and it is said that the soul wanders from life to life until the embodied being realizes spiritual awakening and breaks free from *sansār* for good. The preferred vocabulary employed in the renouncer texts to represent *sansār* concerns that of "bondage" and "suffering." This antinomian grammar of renunciation, as Indologist Patrick Olivelle discusses, "is based on the conviction that nothing within the realms of *saṃsāra*...can truly satisfy the human longing for total and permanent happiness" (1992, 75). Speaking to an elite class of spiritual virtuosi, the texts tend to agree that *sansār*, to the spiritually enlightened, should be avoided at all costs. Thus, the key metaphors of separation and breaking free used to signify *sannyās* and its radical theology of abandoning *sansār* make sense within the parameters of the dominant renunciant religious frame.[11]

But Guru Ma does not speak from this radical perspective when she talks about the world. The word she uses is "duniya," and for her, it epitomizes that which "moves and keeps moving" and "never stops moving." It seems as if she is describing *sansār*, but this is not the case. The idiom of "moves and keeps moving" highlights Guru Ma's idea that "the world" exemplifies what she perceives to be the constantly moving and expanding "life worlds" (*prāṇī-jagat*) of the universe. According to her, the world exemplifies the infinitely generative processes of the birth and becoming of all species in the material world, from the sun to the smallest ant, which make life and its continuation possible. She understands, too, that life in the process of becoming undergoes cycles of growth, decay, and death and associates these complementary material cycles with the natural processes of change. But rather than fear change and equate it with the antithesis to the "real," Guru Ma embraces change, teaching that it illustrates the means by which the real exists. "We are here because of change," she says. Life's becoming constitutes a function of change. Guru Ma says that change "is the rule of nature" and manifests in the causal

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[11] In colloquial Hindi, the notion of *sansār* does not have such frightening connotations. It refers to householding and family, and that these realms tie the human to the wheel of rebirth. See Khandelwal, "Renunciation and Domesticity," in *Hinduism in the Modern World*, ed. Brian K. Hatcher (New York: Routledge), 196-211.

realm of time and space the infinite power of God's creativity (*parabrahman*) that is life becoming, and, by implication, the world becoming.

In her *Advaita Vedanta*-based theology, the world is neither false nor illusory. It is real; life is real, because the world/life is Brahman. In the *kathās* she gives, Guru Ma tells her audience, "Don't see Brahman and the world [*duniyā*] as separate. We are always separating Brahman and the world. We think the world we see is false. But this is wrong. It's not that there's Brahman and then there's the world. Understand that Brahman and the world are the same. Brahman is each and every thing. Brahman is the world. They are the same. There is only Brahman. This is truth. Our ancient sages have said that we know Brahman as much as we know the world." Even as Guru Ma acknowledges that the world is impermanent, moving through infinitely repetitive cycles of creation and destruction, that does not diminish its moral significance and value to her. Impermanence represents a manifest feature of change, and more precisely, the flow of life that she emphasizes is Brahman.

Guru Ma's view of the world (and nature) parallels a process-relational perspective of life. From this standpoint, the world is imagined in terms of an interwoven universe that is made up of living and experiencing beings engaged in the dynamic and continual process of becoming that, in turn, represents life (Mesle 2008). The contemporary philosopher C. Robert Mesle says that, in a process-relational view of the world, "[e]verything is tied together" (11) and "things become and perish" (80). Whitehead used the word "creativity" to describe what he called "the ultimate matter of fact" with respect to the continual becoming of life (Mesle 80). Mesle explains that, in Whitehead's framework, "Creativity is simply the ultimate feature that is shared by all that is actual—by God and the world alike" (Ibid). Guru Ma, too, says that God is the power of creativity in the world of life, and that while God creates on a "big scale," life forms create on a smaller, but no less significant, scale. She says that life's creativity "gives the biggest proof that Brahman is real" and that "the world is Brahman." For her, "the world" brings to mind positive imagery of the dynamic flourishing of life—that life "moves and keeps moving," and not a hideous realm of torture to be escaped.

Drawing on the language of "creativity" and "beauty," Guru Ma's religious imaginary of the world as illustrative of life flourishing and divine embodiment *in process* offers an alternative renunciant grammar to that of suffering and bondage featured in dominant Brahmanical discourse. This understanding readily establishes the moral significance of the world and, in effect, sets a whole different tone for what *sannyās* means and what its values and purpose are in relation to that world.

But the flourishing of life, as Guru Ma suggests, has as much to do with developing its moral capacity as it does with increasing its procreative capacities. It is not only that life keeps moving, but also that it moves forward "in a good way." Thus, the second and most significant rhetorical technique of Guru Ma's *kathās* concerns her reframing *dharm*

to accent the notion of the heightened moral awareness that enables the cultivation of beneficent relationships of humanity to nature. She employs the overlapping terms of "development" (*vikās*) and "progress" (*unnati*) to define this idea of *dharm*. Using the image of the indestructible self (*ātmā*) featured in the *Bhagavad Gītā* (2:13, Patton translation), Guru Ma compares "customs and traditions" to the "clothes" worn by the "eternal" *dharm*. For her, the latter designates the developed moral consciousness that transforms lifeworlds.

Linking its meaning to the development of moral awareness, Guru Ma constructs *dharm* as a heartfelt emotion that is actualized through acts of love, mercy, forgiveness, compassion, and joy. These sensibilities make up what Guru Ma understands to be the five affective "senses" of *dharm*. She says that feeling these sentiments makes it possible for humans to "know *dharm* in the heart" and to experience empathy for nature, which embodies the creative power of life that is God. Guru Ma reflected further on empathy in a conversation we had in 2015. She said, "When humans can love nature in a real way, they will know the true meaning of *dharm*." To love nature "in a real way" realizes her ethic of environmental empathy. It evidences the heightened moral consciousness that she associates with "true" *dharm* and ethical selfhood. Her language of "feeling *dharm*" indicates the rhetorical power of emotions to evoke an experience of environmental empathy from her audience.

"We are all One Cosmic Body": Storytelling and the Construction of human-nature relations

One of the ways that Guru Ma evokes environmental empathy through *kathā* performance has to do with aligning the emotional subjectivities of her audience with those that she attributes to nature. The stories Guru Ma performs help to create such affective alignments. Here is the story she told in a *kathā* held on January 28, 2014 in Silwasa. In this narrative, Guru Ma talks poignantly about her pilgrimage to Kedarnath in the summer of 2013, right before the fatal floods.[12] She says,

> When I went to Kedarnath to do *darśan*, I was very surprised by what I saw. Kedarnath is a sacred land. It is the land of the gods. Many great sages [*mahāṛṣis*] have done penance [*tapasyā*] there. All the great stories [of Hindu *dharm*] happen there...I was very excited about Kedarnath. I felt very lucky to do the *darśan* of that land. When I climbed a little on the mountain in Kedarnath, what did I see? I saw that the entire cliff was full of plastic. It was full of garbage. I was so surprised. There were people coming from other side of the mountain and what were they doing? They were buying food from the shopkeepers and throwing their garbage

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[12] In June of 2013, the pilgrimage town of Kedarnath, located in the state of Uttarakhand, was massively affected by floods that caused thousands of deaths and the destruction of bridges, roads, temples, and residences.

over the cliff where the Ganga is flowing, where the river Mandakini is flowing. It smelled so bad. The area was littered with plastic. You couldn't see the Himalayas but you could see the pouches of Maggi [the Indian version of the famous Ramen noodle]. You could find cold drink bottles, Bisleri bottles. There was plastic everywhere. I felt so sad. I thought, "How will they clean this?" I thought, "If people keeping doing this, by the end of the year, the entire Himalayas will be covered in plastic." Every person thinks, "I've only thrown one bottle," but from this one bottle thousands have accumulated.

I got my answer to this question after three days. The floods came with such a force and cleaned everything. This is not Nature's mistake. Nature never makes a mistake. Everyone was saying that "Nature has broken its rule." In the news channels it was coming that "Ganga is destroying everything. She has shown her terrible form. Ganga is behaving like a demon." But Ganga wasn't behaving like a demon. Those Indians were. How would you like it if someone threw garbage on you? Tell me, would you like it? No one would. Think of how nature feels when we throw garbage on It. Nature hurts like we hurt. It feels pain. We must join with nature; we must join with water; we must join with earth. We are all one body in the expanding body of God...We must help nature to do its *dharm*. Nature's *dharm* is to provide a clean environment and give us pure water. It is humans who have left their *dharm*. That's why all this happened. And that's why they were saying, "Nature has become destructive." But it's not Nature, it's humans who have become destroyers.

Listening to Guru Ma's story about Kedarnath breaks the heart. As I looked out at the sea of people from on top of the stage where I sat as Guru Ma performed her *kathā*, I noticed that the participants were visibly and deeply touched by her potent words. They left a profound impression on the collective body of the audience. The emotions of sorrow, pain, and shame evoked by Guru Ma's telling of the Kedarnath story manifested somatically in many of the women as tears, which they wiped away with the edges of their colorful silk sarees (or Rajputi dresses), and in many of the men as bodily gestures (e.g., the raising of arms and the rotating of hands) that were often accompanied by verbalized interjections (e.g., "*are bapre*," "*kyā bāt hai*," "*hey* Bhagvan"; "oh ho").

But this is exactly the kind of collective affective response that Guru Ma intends to create through performance. Her story elicits from the audience empathy with nature by aligning what she crafts as the "natural" human emotion of "hurt" with the pain and sadness that she says nature also "feels" in response to the careless human behavior of dumping garbage and—worst of all plastic—on its "body." The garbage-covered cliffs of the Himalayas demonstrate in shocking relief (mostly middle class) pilgrims' devaluating of nature and disregard for Hindu mystical traditions. As Guru Ma says, these traditions are steeped in the ancient "penance" practices of the *ṛṣis* who are said to live deep within the heart of the snow-covered Himalayas, which signify the abode of *dharm*.

At the same time, such ecologically destructive attitudes call attention to common cultural perceptions of nature as insentient and inferior to humans. According to Guru Ma, the environmental apathy depicted by pilgrims at Kedarnath (and elsewhere) originates in people's thoughtless adopting of dominant westernized models of consumer capitalism that contribute to environmental dominion.[13] Hence, the emotional alignment with nature that Guru Ma performatively fashions by anthropomorphizing its perceived emotions interrogates those power hierarchies and generates environmental empathy. Nature's pain is felt as if it were the audience's pain, and that shared pain creates an emotional attachment to nature. In addition, the collective pain that surfaces in the bodies of individuals through that emotional attachment stimulates the emotional experience of a collective moral Hindu body, in which nature not only participates, but also symbolizes. Guru Ma's statement that "we are all one body in the ever-expanding cosmic body of God" indexes the understanding that the different bodies of the universe not only share the same underlying emotions, but also that those common emotions unite the various life bodies together into a single moral body. In this framework, destroying nature's "body" is seen to be equivalent to destroying the moral Hindu "body." This vision of nature and humans as one moral body in the cosmic "body" of God articulates a process-relational theology that reimagines Shankara's *Advaita Vedanta* and reinforces an alternative understanding of *dharm* as an ethic of environmental empathy.

The idea of nature as a "thinking" and "feeling" agent of *dharm* shines light on a signal theological attribute of Guru Ma's environmental ethics with respect to the notion that nature exemplifies an intelligent moral agent. In the Kedarnath story, she says that "Nature never makes a mistake." She describes the misguided and damaging media representations of nature, and more specifically, of the Ganga as "destructive," "demonic," and "wrathful" that were featured "day and night" in the news channels. For Guru Ma, however, nothing could be further from the truth. Such representations, as her affective speech indicates, rhetorically distance humans from nature, rather than evoke empathy for it. According to Guru Ma, the Kedarnath "calamity" illustrated nature attempting to restore its health and well-being back to a more wholesome and balanced state. Prior to the floods, nature was extremely ill; the smelly and polluting garbage it endured and contained for so long damaged its health and plunged it into a state of dis-ease. Nature's strength, power, vitality, and flourishing, symbolized by the formidable Himalayas, the Mandakini River flowing below the cliffs, and the vast ecological diversity of the landscape, became weakened from years of human cruelty, selfishness, and insensitivity. Unable to rely on humans to change their ecologically wasteful and destructive habits, nature took control of the situation. Nature exerted moral agency. With help from the atmosphere, the mountains, the earth, and water, nature thoroughly cleansed itself of the human-caused illnesses that had been plaguing its health and obstructing its capacity to do *dharm*.

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[13] See Varma, *The Great Indian Middle Class* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007).

In the way that Guru Ma performs the story, the Kedarnath catastrophe is thought to depict nature's mercy, love, and compassion for life that is God, and not its wrath for, or punishment of, the world. Her concept of nature may be distinguished from popular understandings that nature, particularly in her form as a sacred river, represents a "forgiving" mother as shown in the work of anthropologist Kelly D. Alley (1998; 2000), or exacts "punishment" for moral sins as discussed by the anthropologist Ann Gold (1998) in the context of the Rajasthani villagers with whom she worked. Guru Ma's performance makes clear that the natural destruction that ensued from the floods was nature taking care of life and, for that matter, a direct outcome of pilgrims' ecological apathy. It was hardly nature's "mistake." "Nature," as Guru Ma says, "never left its *dharm*."

Constructing Nature as fulfilling its *dharm* even by the necessary means of catastrophe underscores the notion that it operates as an empathetic and compassionate agent of *dharm*. Nature is as intentional and purposeful as humans, animals, and other sentient life forms; it is also as capable of understanding what makes it sick and changing its mechanisms in order to restore the ecological balance, goodness, health, harmony, energy, beauty, flow, and well-being—in a word: *dharm*, that *is* life and from which life thrives. Nature, Guru Ma teaches, "knows" that it must provide a "clean" and "pure" environment for all species. Life depends on nature to do its *dharm*. "Can you do your *pūjā* without clean water?" she asks the audience. For nature to act otherwise would tamper with the flow of *dharm* and, by implication, the health, well-being, and safety of life on the planet. Guru Ma likes to draw on the example of planetary rotation in the solar system to drive home the idea of nature as an intelligent, intentional, and empathetic agent of *dharm*. She says,

> On my way over to the *kathā*, there was an accident. Why do these accidents happen? The planets never have accidents. They have no rules. You won't find any red light or green light in the planet universe. You won't find any stop sign or speed breakers. And yet, the planets follow their traffic rules. They're all following their *dharm*. But here, we [humans] forget our *dharm*. We forget all our responsibilities to each other. We're in a hurry; we want to come first. We're selfish. This is why accidents happen. It means you haven't followed your *dharm* properly. The earth follows its *dharm* correctly. The earth has one *dharm*. It walks according to that *dharm*...If nature made even a small mistake, everyone and everything would die. Whenever we have accidents or calamities, like droughts, all this happens because there is an obstruction in [the flow of] *dharm*. You think that if something wrong happens, it's because you haven't done the *pūjā-pāṭh* correctly. You haven't lit the *agarbattī* [incense]. You think you've done too little *pūjā-pāṭh* or that you haven't done it right at all. But that's not *dharm*. You must understand what *dharm* is. Look at nature. It's the best teacher of *dharm*.

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For Guru Ma, nature represents a comprehensive category inclusive of terrestrial "bodies" and celestial "bodies" like the sun, moon, stars, galaxies, and the planets.[14] In many of her *kathās*, she reiterates that "We are all one body in the expanding cosmic body of God." Her statement brings to mind an often-cited verse from the *Vishnu Purāṇa* (1.12.38) that says: "Verily, this whole [world] is the body of God."[15] While Guru Ma's comment speaks to the familiar Hindu understanding of the world as representing the material form of manifest divinity, she draws on this idea to spotlight how the many physical bodies within the divine cosmic body operate as a unified moral body in relation to each other. Her telling indicates that planetary cooperation in sustaining cosmic order and balance constitutes the product of the planets' intrinsic capacity to feel empathy. Unlike humans, the planets never have "accidents," because, as Guru Ma implies, they understand that selfishness sets them out-of-sync with each other and destroys the universe. Feeling empathy (or "feeling *dharm*") distinguishes the planets as a moral "body" within God's "body" and articulates an everyday mode of being that, for Guru Ma, "affects" the moral self. Telling the planet story allows Guru Ma to talk about nature in a way that pushes her vision of *dharm* as environmental empathy to the forefront of her *kathās*. Thus, her story constructs *dharm* as the infinitely expanding divine moral power and principle of empathy in the cosmos, illustrated by what Guru Ma represents as a similarly expanding moral universe that desires and promotes the common good of all species of the material world.

But her story gives *dharm* a more substantial theological makeover by also associating it with nature's capacity to sacrifice its personal needs and desires at the altar of the good of the whole for the ultimate well-being of life. The idea of *dharm* as the sacrificing of personal desires to achieve the greater good is well-known in Hinduisms. But that notion primarily applies to humans, not to nature. For this reason, Guru Ma teaches that nature as a whole makes the "best teacher" of *dharm*, because it automatically and intentionally places cosmic happiness and harmony above its own. Nature's ability to prioritize the whole over itself reveals not only its beneficence, but also its love, compassion, and mercy for life that she says is God. Significantly, nature's ability to fulfill its *dharm* constitutes an inherent function of its capacity to feel empathy for the lifeworlds of the universe.

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[14] Pankaj Jain says that he received similar understandings of *dharm* from his research collaborators in northwest India. He explains, "…I heard from my informants that the dharma of the sun (and the fire) is to burn, the dharma of the earth is to revolve around the sun, and so forth" (114). Contextualizing his data, Jain draws on the linguistic theory developed by Weightman and Pandey in order to suggest that the semantic meaning of *dharm* includes the notion of "intrinsic property," as well as that of religion, duty, ethics, cosmic order, and virtue. See Jain, *Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities: Sustenance and Sustainability* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 114-15.

[15] Lance Nelson, "The Dualism of Nondualism: Advaita Vedānta and the Irrelevance of Nature," in *Purifying the Earthly Body of God*, ed. Lance E. Nelson (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 1.

It is worth pointing out that in her descriptions of the "cosmic body," Guru Ma represents nature as the "heart" and "soul" of God. From the viewpoint of Hindu Tantric traditions that conceive of the cosmos as an interconnected energy system (Sherma 1998, 2000; Mookerjee 1988), the heart occupies a revered place. It represents the "seat," or energy center (*cakra*), of emotions. In Guru Ma's theology, the notion of nature as God's heart and, by implication, God's life, indexes the "feeling" and "loving" power of nature; its emotional intelligence. Perhaps another implication involves the realization that just as the heart sustains the life of many creatures, nature, too, sustains God's life. Disrespecting nature is akin to interfering with God's life, as well as breaking God's heart. By protecting nature, environmental empathy works to restore the moral "heart" of Hindus.

As illustrated in the vignette that opens this article, while Guru Ma's devotees were making the *navagraha* (lit., "nine planets") ritual *yantras* (designs) for an upcoming worship ceremony at her ashram, Guru Ma talked about nature in a manner that symbolically echoed the heart signification she often attributes to it in her *kathās*. In that conversation, she called nature a "true friend" and eternal "witness" (*sākṣī*) to humanity. She said, "When you love nature for real, you'll see how much nature loves you back. Nature always gives us the sign that we [humans] should protect it. Have you ever hugged a tree? Have you ever hugged water? Try it. You'll see that nature is alive. It thinks and feels very deeply. When you start talking to nature, you'll come to know that it's your true friend. And when life bleeds out of your true friend, and you see its heart breaking, yours will break, too."

Thus, in Guru Ma's environmental ethics, nature represents a compassionate moral being and empathetic "friend" who, like humans, is said to feel, experience, and enact *dharm* by virtue of its capacity to love and surrender to the cosmic whole. Its feeling empathy helps nature to cooperate with all the beings of creation and accomplish its *dharm*. But humans, too, must follow its example and cooperate with nature by asking its permission to use its resources and by taking better care of it. Nature, unlike most humans, is thought to be determined to do its *dharm*, and when that becomes a challenge, it relies on its devoted protectors, to help restore the moral "body" of the planet.

"Become Ram instead of Demons": Narrative Traditions and Environmental Empathy

In telling the Kedarnath story, Guru Ma threads into her performance a didactic tale from the *Rāmāyan* tradition. Guru Ma's *Rāmāyan* performance heightens further her theological claim of the environmental empathy of *dharm* by aligning the audience with Ram, the moral exemplar of *dharm* in the epic *Rāmāyan*. We may say that Guru Ma's Panchvati story analyzed earlier in this article has the same rhetorical motivation and accomplishes the same rhetorical objective. Here is her tale:

> Those Indians who threw garbage on the Kedarnath Mountains came as devotees, but they left as demons. We've all heard that in the *Mahābhārat*, in the *Rāmāyan*, when the sages would do their *yajñās* [ritual sacrifices], the demons would come and destroy them by throwing garbage on it. All of you have read this *Rāmāyan* story. Vishvamitra appealed to Ram and said, "Protect my *yajñā*. These demons don't let me do my *yajñā*. They just destroy everything. As soon as we start the *yajñās*, they come and throw garbage and bones on it." So, all these devotees who went to Kedarnath did exactly what that the demons did. Because of the demons, the *r̥sis* couldn't complete their *yajñās*. And we're doing the same thing.

Guru Ma's teaching environmental ethics through use of familiar stories like the *Rāmāyan* demonstrates the creative potential that such narrative traditions have in raising environmental awareness and shifting dominant human-nature relations by locating an ethic of environmental empathy within an authoritative Hindu symbolic. Her practices confirm Arti Dhand's (2002) astute insight that the Hindu epics bring to light "in the behaviors of idealized epic characters" universal views about *dharm* that transcend the specificities of caste, class, gender, and age (360). She says,

> All cultures feed their young on morsels of the culture's foundational myths, but this is perhaps more true of Hindu culture than many others. Hindu children are raised on the bounty of nutriment gained from the Hindu epics, and it is from these that Hindus first learn how to orient themselves morally to their world...The Hindu epics, simultaneously performative, narrative, and didactic, form the core vocabulary of every artistic arena in Hinduism, and indeed, of the larger cultural landscape of South and Southeast Asia. Moral instruction is gleaned through constant exposure to them in various idioms. Ultimately, one aspires not simply to emulation of epic characters, but to an active re-creation or grafting of the epic narrative onto one's own individual life (Dhand 2002, 360).

Pankaj Jain (2011) has similarly shown that the rural communities with whom he worked draw on the *Rāmāyan* narrative in the development of an environmental ethos of sustainability (110), and the same may be said about Guru Ma's environmental ethics. The *Rāmāyan* tale, one that is as familiar to the Hindus whom Guru Ma teaches as the air they breathe, is here interpreted by Guru Ma in the specific context of environmental caretaking. As the paragon of virtue, Ram, a skilled warrior (he is trained by warrior-turned-sage Vishvamitra) and exiled king of Ayodhya, actualizes his *dharm* in large part by protecting the *r̥sis* of the forest from the capricious demons (*rākṣasās*) who seek to kill the *r̥sis* and destroy their *yajñās*, the ritual sacrifices performed to protect and sustain *dharm* and the world. But notice that, for Guru Ma, Ram's protecting the *r̥sis* and their *yajñās* from harm is not only equivalent to protecting the natural environment from destruction, and by implication, the world from immorality, but also emotionally rooted in the feeling of empathy that she suggests Ram feels in regard to nature's imagined pain, humiliation, and suffering at the hands of the demons. His empathizing with nature's

plight, according to Guru Ma, makes him "the best human." Seeing the demons destroy nature's "body," as her telling signals, breaks Ram's heart and fuels his protection of it in his effort to restore cosmic balance and the moral order of the world.

Telling the Ram story, Guru Ma teaches that environmental empathy constitutes a moral imperative that goes beyond caste and class, and even geographical, specificities. And yet, her performance still carries caste-related significations. That the ethic of environmental empathy, and the acts of conservation, preservation, and protection thought to be inspired by it, illuminate another dimension of Ram's *Kṣatriya dharm* is not lost on Guru Ma's audience. In the context of the Silwasa *kathā*, as a substantial number of these participants come from diverse Rajput communities and represent themselves as descendants of the *Kṣatriya* class, the particular caste correlation that her performance makes between these audience members and Ram as the protector of *dharm* suggests that the *dharm* of environmental empathy applies as much to Rajputs as it does to Hindus in general.

By focusing the telling of the *Rāmāyan* story around the theme of nature's moral agency accented by the Kedarnath narrative, Guru Ma builds into the familiar concept of *dharm* the ethic of environmental empathy. The moral ecology conceived by her and her community produces a Hindu-inspired social imaginary (Taylor 2004),[16] in which environmental empathy signifies a modern type of *yajñā* performance that is congruent with rapidly changing social conditions and expectations, as well as changing concepts of *dharm* and the moral in contemporary South Asia. Her performance stimulates awareness of environmental problems and encourages a collective social commitment to environmental conservation/protection by weaving *dharm* on the woof of ecological sustainability.

Storytelling helps Guru Ma motivate the audience to engage in environmental action by making the moral and the ecological intersect in the idealized character of Ram. Through her telling, the moral Hindu "body" not only surfaces but is also affectively fashioned through emphasis on the environmental empathy and practices that distinguish Ram as a model of ethical selfhood. What is more, his body symbolizes the moral Hindu "body" that Guru Ma constructs through performance, and by which means she crafts on account of the signs of affect that shape her telling the boundaries between the "inside" and the "outside" of that body. Insofar as Ram enacts environmental empathy, he represents what Guru Ma says "dharmic" Hindus in India and the Diaspora, regardless of caste, class, and other factors, must strive to become in everyday life: compassionate, loving, merciful, forgiving, and joyous protectors of the world of nature. Hindus who live by this ethic align

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[16] Taylor defines the term "social imaginary" as a social reality that "refers to the way we together imagine our social existence, for instance, that our most important actions are those of the whole society, which must be structured in a certain way to carry them out." See Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 55.

themselves with the divine exemplar Ram, and through conscientious environmental action, come to experience and participate in the moral Hindu "body," which is seen to manifest the divine "body" of Ram. By contrast, Hindus who destroy nature and the earth stand outside of that sacred body.

Translating Rhetoric into Social Action—Everyday Environmental Empathy at Guru Ma's Ashram

But what *is* the connection between the rhetoric of environmental empathy that Guru Ma performs in *kathā* and everyday forms of environmentally engaged social action on the part of her devotees? If the environmental practices evident at Guru Ma's ashram in Udaipur are any indication, it seems that her rhetorical practices are helping to transform the lives of her devotees and evoke ecological change in her growing religious community. From the first time I stepped onto the property of Shree Kulam ashram, I noticed that Guru Ma's ashram maintains one of the cleanest natural environments that I have ever seen in my fifteen years of fieldwork experience in and around ashrams in North India. Not a single plastic bottle or scrap of trash catches the eye. This outcome represents the hard work of Guru Ma and her devotees. At the ashram, one finds people engaged in the ethical practices of recycling, composting, rain water conservation, tree conservation and preservation, and, more recently, organic farming.[17] One of Guru Ma's devotees, a college-educated woman in her early twenties, has co-founded a local collaborative enterprise in Udaipur, known as Eco-Hut, which produces new biodegradable materials out of recycled garbage. This devotee also teaches children and adults at the ashram how to make colored pigments from recycled materials.

In connection with recycling, and in response to her devotee's work, Guru Ma says that,

> There is no shortage of people in this world who are producing and spreading waste and garbage. Now we need those people who can recycle and reuse this waste in an efficient way to make this world even more beautiful. Human beings are the only ones who spread waste, so if we have such people who can utilize the waste in an efficient and appropriate manner, then this world will be a more tidy, clean and beautiful place to live in. If we will not accept the concept of recycling the waste then it will be hazardous for us.

Her comment suggests that recycling enacts a type of environmental *yajñā* in modern times. Her devotees approach recycling and the other environmental practices in which they engage daily as powerful ritual acts through which they not only protect the "body" of nature, and by implication, the moral Hindu "body," but also serve Guru Ma. They demonstrated their environmental empathy at the ashram in these and other ways. For

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[17] Vanita Ojha, email message to author, June 14, 2016.

example, when I brought undergraduate students to India as part of a summer study abroad program at my university, I introduced them to Guru Ma, who spoke about Hindu versions of sustainability and environmental care. As she instructed the students, answering their questions on religion, development, and modernization, the devotees attending the event, men and women, householders and unmarried college-aged students, worked together in the preparation of the evening meal. As they laid out the eating utensils for dinner in the ashram's main meeting room, my students and I observed that the food was served on biodegradable "plates" constructed from the leaves of the ashram's trees and the drinking water was poured in small cups made from recycled paper. All unused materials were set aside for composting on the next day.

The devotees' environmental practices suggest that Guru Ma's moral performances of environmental empathy are, so far, bringing about real change in people's perceptions and, as significantly, experiences of the natural environment and provoking everyday forms of social action. Through their practices, Guru Ma's devotees create and participate in the moral Hindu "body" that she emphasizes is necessary to ensure the continuity and flourishing of life on the planet for all "generations." And through the cultivation of empathy that such practices are said to engender, her devotees model ethical Hindu selfhood, showing to people within and outside of that community what it means to be "the best humans" in modern times. As Guru Ma says, "the best humans take care of the earth. The day we become the best humans is the day we'll love the earth in a real way."

Conclusion: Environmental Empathy and Securing the Common Good in 21ˢᵗ-century India

The increasing social and ecological complexities that India faces in the 21ˢᵗ century are inspiring *sādhus* like Guru Ma to think "outside of the box" when it comes to Hinduism and craft an environmental ethics from within the moral vocabulary of empathy. Using the historical example of Adi Shankaracarya (henceforth, Shankara), who formulated the non-dual theology of *Advaita Vedanta* and institutionalized *sannyās* during a time of momentous change in India (Rukmini 1994), Guru Ma says that *sādhus* have to "break the rules" if they want to transform cultural attitudes and practices that obstruct the common good. By "breaking the rules" she means the capacity to move beyond the "rules, customs, opinions, and traditions" that tend to dictate behavior and make responsible ethical decisions that align with the circumstances of the times in which people live.

Speaking about Shankara, Guru Ma tells a familiar story, in which, as a young boy of six years, and compelled by his detachment, he wants to set off on the path of *sannyās*, but his mother refuses to give him permission. To extract her permission, through his mental power, Shankara creates a scene by the river where his mother performs her ritual ablutions every day. As Shankara goes to bathe in the river, a crocodile grabs him and begins to pull him under the water. Witnessing the event, his mother reacts with horror and Shankara requests her to allow him to become a *sannyāsī* as his last wish. She agrees and the illusion (*māyā*) disappears, much to his mother's surprise. Shankara sets off for

his journey, but not before promising to perform her last rites. Guru Ma's "breakthrough into performance" occurs as she comments on the story (Hymes 1975). She says,

> Just look at our Shankaracaryaji! He had so much love for his mother. He is the best *sannyāsī* in the world. You won't find a *sannyāsī* like him. He was soft for his mother. He left everything in the middle [of his journey] for his mother. Why? Because he had to fulfill his duties. The meaning of *sannyās* is not that you just leave everything behind. But we have established this picture in our minds. *Sādhus*, too, have done this. Definitely, we are responsible for this...When Shankaracaryaji did the last rites of his mother, at that time he broke all the rules and regulations of *sannyās*. At that time, he went against the rules of *sannyās*. The real meaning of *sannyāsī* is the one who breaks the rules in order to distinguish the truth from what is false...It is written in our texts [*granth*] that *sannyāsīs* cannot do the last rites [of their parents]. But Shankaracaryaji did it. Why? What did he say at last? The truth you can feel is the truth...For the mature *sannyāsīs*, the real *sannyāsīs*, the rules go with them. They come out from their hearts. The will not read a law book to make their decisions.

As she tells the tale, Guru Ma situates the capacity to adapt to the changing circumstances of life within the hermeneutic of empathy. Telling the Shankara story, Guru Ma teaches that being ethically responsible in the modern era demands experimenting with the interpretive boundaries of *dharm* in socially responsive ways to introduce new ideas and engage people's moral commitments. The moral agency that Shankara enacts by "breaking the rules" in his own experimenting with the boundaries of what "counts" as *sannyās* models Guru Ma's idea of the authentic modern. "He was so advanced. He cared about the world. He moved the world forward. He was more modern than we are today," she says. She suggests that Shankara's moral capacity to feel empathy for his mother and change this thinking about the practice of *sannyās* distinguishes him as modern. In this way, Guru Ma's story teaches that renunciation is not simply about leaving behind people, places, and customs. Rather, renunciation is a moral life. As Guru Ma says, the *sādhu* feels "in the heart" that "the entire world has become his [or her] family" and strives to create a better world for all beings. Shankara's story, as Guru Ma performs it, has, in fact, inspired her social and environmental work. Through his example, Guru Ma approaches *sannyās* from within a social activist frame and works for the welfare of the world. Combining her practice of *sannyās* with environmental advocacy, she shows that working to improve the quality and conditions of nature constitutes working for the world's welfare. Whether a person is a householder like Ram, or a *sādhu* like Shankara, Guru Ma's stories make clear that environmental empathy promotes a common *dharm* and helps to achieve the common good by improving quality of life for all beings. She says that "a bad environment is bad for the soul."

The environmental ethics that Guru Ma imagines and creates through her rhetorical performances counter the claim that "Hindu renunciation does not have 'quality of life' as

its goal" (Khandelwal 2016, 202). Her *kathā* practices establish that the *sādhu* role in 21st-century India requires improving quality of life by which the common good becomes secured for all species of the earth. For her, quality of life is a moral issue. But quality of life, in Guru Ma's view, one which many of her devotees share, is not about accumulating goods, wearing the latest fashions, or driving the latest model of cars, behaviors which often drive middle-class householder notions of "the good life" and, in effect, adversely affect the environment (Seshagiri Rao, 2000; Chapple 1998). For her, quality of life is related to cultivating the moral virtues of simplicity, restraint, and empathy in everyday modes of being, which allow humans, as she says, "to live with nature in a good way."

Guru Ma may be a *sādhu*, but she, too, wants to breathe clean air, drink pure water, and eat food that has not been spoiled by chemicals or hazardous waste. Being able to do so is what quality of life means to her. I would imagine that as a *sādhu* she is not alone. By calling people's attention to environmental pollution, water shortages, and waste control, she encourages in the communities which she seeks to transform through means of her environmental ethics the moral understanding that protecting the common good demands collective commitment and is linked to a healthy environment, as well as to the spiritual development of self and social transformation of society. For her, these are one and the same goals, and they inform her idea of *mokṣ* as realizing one's emotional connection with, and ethical responsibility to nature, life, and the world that is seen to be God.

To conclude, the implications of crafting *dharm* as environmental empathy in everyday Hinduism(s) are far-reaching. After all, the health, happiness, and the future of life hang in the balance. But if the experimental Hinduism of *sādhus* like Guru Ma and her community as discussed here offers any consolation, and I believe it does, it is that her *Advaita Vedanta*-based process-relational theology articulates a renewed vision of hope for the 21st-century global community in its reimagining of *dharm* from the lens of environmental empathy. This Hindu theological tradition, like many others that came before it and on which it is developed, has the potential to alter human consciousness and the worlds they live in by transforming their perceptions and experiences of the nature as a whole. Guru Ma's theology strives toward achieving this goal by constructing nature both as an intelligent *and* compassionate moral agent and friend of humanity who works for the benefit of the world. Reframing *dharm* as environmental empathy, along with anthropomorphizing the perceived emotional subjectivity of nature to evoke that emotion, Guru Ma carves out an ecological moral vision that provokes people to take responsibility for themselves and the natural environment.

In her theology, nature exemplifies an empowered co-creator in the genesis and continuity of creation and embodies the moral power, consciousness, and presence of the divine Absolute. The moral authority that Guru Ma accords to nature as a whole derives from her understanding that it, along with humans, participates actively in the

flourishing of life and that, as a sentient being that experiences pain and pleasure, it, too, feels empathy for the lifeworlds of an expanding universe.

For sure, this process-relational view of God, nature, and *dharm* that Guru Ma teaches and transmits in/through multiple *kathā* contexts evidences a different, and worldly, kind of *Advaita theology* than what is traditionally associated with the classical teachings developed by Shankara. At the same time, it offers a powerful corrective to the destructive ways that people often treat nature, which, according to Guru Ma, is painfully evident in the most sacred places of *dharm*. Despite the challenges that lie ahead, her ethic of environmental empathy is contributing to ecological change in contemporary India. Her performances inspire and create change by fostering new relationships of humanity to the world of nature. And, for Guru Ma, this kind of change is "very good." She says, "We always have to change our ways, because change is the rule of nature and the nature of *dharm*."

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Daiva Varṇāśrama Dharma and the Formation of Modern Vaiṣṇava Subjects in the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Mumbai

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Abstract

As inheritors of a transnational, institutionalized Vaiṣṇava tradition, the Indian members of ISKCON's Chowpatty Mumbai temple community negotiate their strict religious practice within Mumbai's globalized cityscape. Their community has developed oases of religious training centered on the practice of *daiva varṇāśrama dharma*, described in community literature as a "Vedic system of social organization with a spiritual perspective." This revisioned approach to *vaidika* Vaiṣṇava ethics takes shape in a community-wide network called the Counselling System, aimed at training ethical selves to embody a model of Vaiṣṇava *bhakti*. Chowpatty's Counselling System provides a space for the cultivation of an alternative modernity—applying tropes of self-care and legitimizing discourses of education to a renewed construction of Vaiṣṇava community. My article will explore *dharma* as an interpretative category in Chowpatty's Counselling System, through analysis of training manuals and public courses produced for Mumbai's upper and middle class residents.

Keywords: ISKCON, varṇāśrama, bhakti, dharma, Mumbai

The Indian members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) in the western Indian city of Mumbai negotiate an identity that is both *transnational*, linked to an international religious organization that is often known primarily through its development in the United States, and *traditionalist*, as strict practitioners of a Vaiṣṇava tradition within Mumbai's modern cityscape. Their community has developed oases of religious training centered on the practice of *daiva varṇāśrama dharma*, described in community literature as a "Vedic system of social organization with a spiritual perspective." However, they strive to eschew caste stratification and insist that one's placement in this system is based not on birth or *jāti* (birth-based group) but on character (*guṇa*) and actions (*karma*) in this present life. For the Radha Gopinath temple of Girgaon Chowpatty, Mumbai (known in shorthand as Chowpatty), this revisioned approach to *vaidika* Vaiṣṇava ethics takes shape in a community-wide network called the Counselling

System, aimed at training ethical selves to embody a model of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* in sync with brahmanical lifestyle norms.[1] Chowpatty's Counselling System articulates a revisioning of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition, dating back to the sixteenth century, that is couched in the language of contemporary self-help and wellness discourses.[2] My article will explore the fluidity of *dharma* as an interpretative category in Chowpatty's Counselling System, through analysis of the training manuals and public courses produced for Mumbai's upper- and middle-class residents. I will also discuss how the value placed on brahmanical identity as a legitimizing religious norm has been appropriated by ISKCON Chowpatty's members from a range of caste backgrounds. Through their understanding of *daiva varṇāśrama-dharma*, Chowpatty fashions an alternative modernity within the cityscape of Mumbai, articulating an holistic lifestyle of modern religious traditionalism in opposition to secular modernity. However, to understand the reconceptualization of *dharma* in this systemization of a religious community and its effects on Chowpatty's members' lifestyles, I will first lay out the shifts in understanding *varṇāśrama-dharma* within modern Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism that have enabled ISKCON's members in Mumbai to further revision and enact their distinctive practice of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition.

The Specificity and Fluidity of Dharma

Dharma has long been a term that is considered context-specific. This specificity often takes form in relation to *jāti* and *sva-dharma,* the specific duties expected of one based on one's gender, class, and stage of life. These divisions were crystallized in classical brahmanical Hindu traditions into the system of *varṇāśrama-dharma*, the brahmanical Hindu division of society into four *varṇa*s, or social classes—*brāhmaṇa, kṣatriya, vaiśya*, and *śudra*[3]—and four *āśrama*s, or stages of life—*brahmacārin, gṛhastha, vānaprastha*, and *saṃnyāsin.*[4] One can derive the specific injunctions and prohibitions of this system from the *Dharma-Sūtras* and *Dharma-Śāstras*, genres of religio-legal texts compiled from the last few centuries BCE into the first millennium CE.[5] Within their world of context-specificity, however, a number of variables remain unfixed and in flux for living Hindu

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[1] This system is generally described in official documents with the British spelling, as the Counselling System, however it is occasionally also described in the US spelling, as Counseling System. I will follow the British spelling throughout this paper.

[2] While this system draws on models for ISKCON communities that include commonalities across Indian ISKCON centers—such as the Bhakti Vṛkṣa groups developed in ISKCON Mayapur and elsewhere—the Chowpatty center's development of a Counselling System has been a novel take on these models and has since spread to other ISKCON centers, as will be described below.

[3] These socio-occupational categories are, respectively, priests and teachers; rulers and warriors; merchants and agriculturalists; and laborers.

[4] These stages of life are, respectively, the stages of being a celibate student; married householder; hermit or forest-dweller; and renunciant.

[5] See Olivelle (1999) and (2005).

communities. For instance, who determines the details and ethical parameters of an action at any given time? How might an individual's multiple identities overlap and conflict with injunctions or prohibitions even within a framework of *varṇāśrama-dharma*? And more broadly, is *dharma* most properly a term that relates to each individual within his or her specific social context, as outlined in the particularistic social stratification of the *Dharma-Śāstra* texts? Or can *dharma* be practiced without reference to socio-economic categories, in more universal forms such as the *sādhāraṇa dharma, dharmic* principles "common to all" that are outlined alongside *varṇāśrama-dharma* in the second or third century CE Manu-Smṛti,[6] or in the various iterations of *sanātana dharma,* "eternal" *dharma,* that have been advanced by many modern Hindu communities? The necessarily provisional answers to these questions have varied throughout modern brahmanically-based Hindu communities. While many have distanced themselves from the social inequities inherent in the classical *varṇāśrama* system, some have chosen to maintain a particularistic, class-based notion of *dharma* while others have focused on articulating *sanātana dharma* as a core ethical orientation promoting virtues such as tolerance and equanimity—despite on-going debates about the definitive philosophical tenets of *sanātana dharma*.

Dharma functions as a central self-identifier for ISKCON members in several ways. Contemporary ISKCON members often describe their religious tradition as above and beyond religious categories such as "Hindu" or "Muslim," and prefer the appellation "*sanātana dharma*" to designate their Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya,* or lineage. Although born into Indian, overwhelmingly Hindu households, Chowpatty's members routinely described themselves instead as followers of *sanātana dharma*, which they gloss as a Vedic tradition culminating in Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*. However, in the public profile that the community develops in Mumbai, they also represent themselves as defenders of Hindu *dharma* broadly, allying with other modern Hindu organizations and political parties over against perceived secular and Westernizing influences in the city. In both of these cases, ISKCON followers in Mumbai engage in creative reformulations of *dharma* within their modern urban context, conveying the fluid and flexible form of *dharma* as an interpretative category. However, the community is perhaps most significant in relation to other transnational Hindu organizations through their understanding of *varṇāśrama-dharma*. ISKCON's urban Indian communities have fashioned a thoroughly modernized revisioning of *varṇāśrama-dharma,* as I shall show below.

Varṇāśrama-dharma Reborn for a Modern Age

Founded in New York in 1966, ISKCON was the first successful large-scale missionary efforts led by Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas to transplant Bengal's traditions of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* onto North American soil. The Gauḍīya traditions that were mediated to young Americans through ISKCON's founder, A.C. Bhaktivedānta Swami (1896-1977), had been shaped by

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[6] Discussed in Olivelle (2005), 24-25.

Bengal's "Hindu Renaissance" in association with trends among the Bengali *bhadralok,* or intelligentsia, toward both institutionalizing and universalizing their local religious and cultural traditions. The institutionalized version of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism that Bhaktivedānta spread through his organization and writings communicated the reforms set in place by his guru, Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī (1874-1937) and Bhaktisiddhānta's father, Kedarnath Datta Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura (1838-1914). The influential father and son hailed from a Bengali *kāyastha* family that was oriented toward Śakta worship before Bhaktivinoda's turn toward Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* in his adult years. Bhaktivinoda and Bhaktisiddhānta developed new lines of orthodoxy and emphasized a missionary orientation in the Gauḍīya tradition, formulating a systematized and reproducible form of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism that could be exported to diverse transnational publics.[7]

Perhaps the most significant shift in their reframing of the Gauḍīya tradition for broader audiences occurred in Bhaktisiddhānta's reformulation of *varṇāśrama-dharma.* Since their inception in sixteenth-century Bengal, Gauḍīya communities expressed a complex array of perspectives on *varṇāśrama* norms, ranging from an instantiation of hereditary priestly lineages in the Gauḍīya *gosvāmin* families to the provocative flaunting of caste hierarchies within certain religious contexts, such as in the initiation of brahmin disciples by non-brahmin gurus.[8] However, in their largely Sanskritic scriptural corpus and brahmanically inflected lifestyle norms, including strict vegetarianism and extensive restrictions for maintaining ritual purity, the orthodox Gauḍīya tradition is in many ways inseparable from a framework that exalts brahmanical identity. As Bhaktivinoda and Bhaktisiddhānta reconsidered the parameters of the Gauḍīya tradition in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Calcutta, rather than advocating for an abolishment of caste categories altogether they argued for the universal application of *varṇa* and *āśrama,* casting *varṇa* into an individualist framework based on personal character and occupational inclination rather than birth and family occupation.[9] This was laid out explicitly in Bhaktisiddhānta's iconic 1911 speech, *Brāhmaṇa o Vaiṣṇava,* later published as a treatise in Bengali that argued for his interpretation with reference to the corpus of Sanskritic scriptural texts accepted by mainstream Vaiṣṇava communities. In his *Brahman o Vaiṣṇava,* Bhaktisiddhānta cites the *Dharma-śāstras* of Parāśara and Śātātapa to confirm an ontological vision of brahmanical superiority in religious, social, and legal spheres. Noting that the prestige of brahmins is seen throughout the *Itihāsas* and the *Purāṇas,* he then argues however that Vaiṣṇava *bhakta*s, or devotees, are superior to those *born* into a brahmanical *jāti.* He asserts this through a comprehensive text-based argument that draws predominantly from the *Mahābhārata* and the *Bhagavata Purāṇa,* as well as with

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[7] See Robison (2014) for details.

[8] Contrary to Lorenzen's (2004) classification of the Gauḍīyas as a *varṇadharmī bhakti* movement. For details, see Holdrege (2015), 184-85, 190.

[9] See Sardella (2013) for a contextualization of Bhaktisiddhānta's views on caste in light of the economic and institutional rationalization that colonialism enforced, along with the new demands of urban life.

other Sanskritic texts within Vaiṣṇava and Vedantic traditions broadly. A number of the passages he cites include lists of the ideal qualities, or *lakṣaṇa*s, of *brāhmaṇa*s—such as one passage, spoken by the pious king Yudhiṣṭhira in the *Mahābhārata*, which defines a *brāhmaṇa* as a person whose character includes the qualities of truthfulness (*satyaṁ*), charity (*dānaṁ*), patience (*kṣamā*), compassion (*ānṛśaṁsya*), religious austerity (*tapas*) and warmth toward others (*ghṛṇā*).[10] He also draws from similar lists in the *Bhagavata Purāṇa* (7.11.21) and the *Bhagavad-Gītā* (18.42)—which both include the qualities of *śama* (equanimity), *dama* (self-restraint), *tapas* (religious austerity), and *śaucaṁ* (purity) to establish the notion that brahmanical identity is based on virtuous qualities.[11] Bhaktisiddhānta's revisioning of *varṇāśrama* became a flash point for resentment within the brahmanical communities of both Calcutta and the Gauḍīya pilgrimage center of Navadvīp. However, through the institution that he formed in 1920—the Gauḍīya Maṭh— he was able to popularize his vision of ideal *varṇāśrama* among a large group of followers.

In Bhaktisiddhānta's estimation, an individual's *varṇa* would be ideally determined by inclinations observed throughout one's early life, through which this individual would enter into a *"daiva"* or "divine" *varṇāśrama* system rather than the "mundane" *varṇāśrama* system as developed in historical *jāti*-based stratification.[12] This rhetoric, not uncommon in late colonial India, imagined the ideal *varṇāśrama* system to be distinct from the present-day "corrupt" or "distorted" caste system;[13] the former of which, according to M.K. Gandhi for instance, was "in its origin . . . a wholesome custom and promoted national well-being."[14] On this basis of reframing caste categories, Bhaktisiddhānta inaugurated a Vaiṣṇava *saṃnyāsa* initiation ritual in the Gauḍīya Mission, drawing on established patterns of the Daśanami *saṃnyāsa* lineage but repurposing them to build up an institutionalized Gauḍīya lineage of renunciation. He also formulated a *brāhmaṇa* initiation, enabling both his lay and monastic followers to partake in the symbols of brahmanical religious privilege, including ritual recitation of the Gāyatrī *mantra* and an *upanāyana* ceremony, in which the sacred thread was bestowed for male adherents. This initiation was designed to be given to anyone, regardless of caste background, based on their allegiance to live in accordance with brahmanical lifestyle norms and Gauḍīya *sādhana,* meditative practice. Bhaktivedānta later extended this initiation ceremony to women as well within ISKCON. Indeed, through ISKCON's spread

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[10] This dialogue takes place in the *Mahābhārata*, Vaṇa Parva, 180.

[11] Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī (1934).

[12] See Sardella (2013), 82ff.

[13] See, for instance, Gandhi's articles in *Young India*, October 20, 1927; *Harijan*, April 15, 1933; *Harijan*, January 12, 1934, republished in Hingorani ed. 1965.

[14] From *Young India*, February 25, 1920. Republished in Hingorani ed. (1965). The imperative to establish this ancient system in contemporary India is elaborated in *Harijan*, August 24, 1934. Republished in Hingorani ed. (1965), 101-102.

outside of India Bhaktivedānta institutionalized Bhaktisiddhānta's revisioning of *varṇāśrama-dharma* through his initiation of followers from North America and Europe, and later Africa and Asia broadly—most of whom fell far beyond the confines of the fourfold *varṇāśrama* categorization. In a milieu of challenges and reformulations to the caste system, then, Bhaktisiddhānta and later Bhaktivedānta steered modern institutionalized Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism toward a course of both universalism and traditionalism, encoding new and comparatively egalitarian norms into an underlying fabric of brahmanical ritual and lifestyle patterns. Although the categorization scheme of *varṇāśrama-dharma* had been liberated from a birth-based model, the legitimizing symbols of brahmanical identity and the underlying value judgments encoded into the preference for a brahmanical lifestyle, as laid out in Sanskritic Vaiṣṇava texts, were maintained.[15]

This reformulation of *varṇāśrama-dharma* within a late colonial Indian context complicated ISKCON's attempts at transnational missionizing, even as it also fuelled it. New ISKCON converts from European-American and Russian and Japanese backgrounds were confronted with questions of whether they were meant to incorporate a *daiva varṇāśrama* system into their own religious communities—one which would inevitably sit oddly alongside larger cultural contexts in which *varṇa* and *āśrama* categories had no historical resonance. Yet, Bhaktivedānta expressed a strong desire for his multiethnic transnational followers to establish "*varṇāśrama* colleges" to "train" young adults within and outside of India in how to properly embody their roles within one of the four *varṇa* categories. He specifically delineated the need to train the *brāhmaṇa*, *kṣatriya,* and *vaiśya* classes—known collectively as the *dvijā,* "twice-born," or those qualified to participate in Vedic rituals and in the socio-economic benefits of the *varṇāśrama* system—and he envisioned that these followers would be emplaced in a *varṇa* identity during the childhood or young adult years. This categorization would apply to both monastic and lay members of the organization. On one occasion, speaking with two European-American disciples in a recorded conversation in 1974, it was clear that Bhaktivedānta intended these class categories to be adopted through educational and training processes by his followers widely, asserting that—although as Kṛṣṇa *bhakta*s his followers should be ultimately above *varṇāśrama*—at the same time a social grounding in *varṇāśrama* was necessary: "First of all, the whole society must be divided into four *varṇa*s. Otherwise, there will be chaotic condition. . . if you organize the society into *varṇa*s, there will be no question of unemployment."[16] Bhaktivedānta's proclamation that this system should be

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[15] This reformulation of *varṇāśrama-dharma* shares family resemblances with the interpretation set by Dayānanda Sarasvatī's theory of merit-based *varṇa* in relation to the *śuddhi* ("purification") ceremony, or "re-conversion" into the Hindu fold. This included the stipulation that twice-born *varṇa* could then be assigned following the *śuddhi* rites. See Jordens (1978) and Zavos (2001).

[16] Bhaktivedānta Swami, "Morning Walk: *Varṇāśrama* College," March 14, 1974, Vṛndāvana. Preserved in the Bhaktivedānta Archives.

adopted by "the whole society" is remarkable for its ambitious reach, particularly given the predominantly non-Indian ethnic demographic composition of his ISKCON organization at that time. A range of Western followers' individual occupations were widely reinterpreted within the framework of the four *varṇa* categories, and a causal association of certain occupations with a corresponding *varṇa* category continues today in ISKCON settings.[17]

The *varṇāśrama-dharma* system for Bhaktivedānta was a squarely socio-economic system, but one grounded in what he called "spiritual advancement" rather than in the reiteration of entrenched caste stratification. However, he went on to express a dismissive attitude toward those he deemed *śudra*s, describing them as "those who are not fit for education" and those who should be trained "to become obedient" and "abide by the orders" of the higher classes. Remarkably, while Bhaktivedānta held fast to the necessity of categorizing an ideal society into the four *varṇa* categories, his clear valuation of *brāhmaṇa* as "higher" and "more-educated" and *śudra* as "lower" and "less-educated," although resonating deeply with contemporary casteism, was fitted into a framework in which these *varṇa* identities were revealed by a person's character rather than assigned at birth and were thus teachable even to those born outside of India's caste-based society. While Bhaktivedānta's vision of *varṇāśrama-dharma* was thus differently embodied, the value assigned to brahmanical identity remained consonant with earlier brahmanical proclamations of the superiority of the upper classes. As with Bhaktisiddhānta's argument for the reinterpretation of *varṇāśrama-dharma,* Bhaktivedānta did not seek to reject the Sanskritic brahmanical textual tradition in which Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism situated itself but rather to reinterpret the socio-economic categories assumed by the literature.

After Bhaktivedānta's passing in 1977, much ink has been spilled on how exactly to import a *varṇāśrama-dharma* system into the variety of diverse cultural and geographic contexts that comprise ISKCON's transnational community, and to what extent implementing a system of socio-economic stratification is relevant to the pursuit of a Gauḍīya religious life. A number of ISKCON followers in the United States and elsewhere have gravitated away from the goal of importing a *varṇāśrama-dharma* system into their present communities, appealing to its impracticality in their time and place. As ISKCON centers have transformed from predominantly monastic communities to predominantly lay and family-based communities, the immediate relevance of *varṇāśrama-dharma* categories to

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[17] Several businesspeople within the Chowpatty community, for instance, explained their career successes through an appeal to their categorization as *vaiśya*s. Within this equation of one's career with a *varṇa* category, however, emphasis is often placed on cultivating an attitude of *sevā,* or service, in one's professional life as well as one's personal life. In the case of the businesspeople affiliated with the Chowpatty community, this often manifests through the contribution of regular donations to the temple or the sponsorship of temple-based philanthropic projects, such as the community's Bhaktivedānta Hospital.

members' day-to-day lives has also become complicated.[18] However, others continue to stand firmly by the goal of an implementation of a *varṇāśrama-dharma* system in the ISKCON organization as a model for modern societies broadly.

On the one hand, Bhaktisiddhānta's maneuver in revisioning *varṇāśrama-dharma*, through the assertion that brahmanical identity was embodied not by birth but attainable through training or guidance, opened up Gauḍīya identity and also Gauḍīya religious authority to a diverse transnational audience. ISKCON has realized this prerogative in the form of imbuing non-Indian convert-practitioners with some of the highest religious leadership positions in the organization both in and out of India. However on the other hand, this *daiva varṇāśrama* ideal sets up a particularly complex set of allegiances for Indian ISKCON followers. ISKCON's brahmanically oriented religious profile has attracted a number of brahmins to its urban Indian centers. At ISKCON's Chowpatty temple in Mumbai, where I conducted field research, a sizeable majority of the core administrative managers and religious teachers of the community happened to be from brahmin backgrounds. Intriguingly, however, this demographic cut across a range of North and South Indian regional backgrounds, encompassing people who had immigrated to Mumbai for work or higher education and members of longstanding Marathi brahmin families. At the same time, assertions to transcend caste categorization and to see oneself as a servant (*dāsa* or *dāsī*) of the divine master, Kṛṣṇa, pervade ISKCON Chowpatty's temple-based lectures and courses. This identity of subservience in the religious sphere is underscored by the naming process involved in joining an ISKCON congregation formally through *dīkṣā*, or initiation, which is available to all ISKCON members—male or female, lay and monastic—provided they display an adherence to ISKCON's *sādhana* practices and lifestyle injunctions.[19] In the *dīkṣā* process, ISKCON members are given a Sanskrit name by their guru that is patterned on the lexicon of Gauḍīya texts and hagiographical narratives, including the names of Vaiṣṇava *avatāra*s and epithets for Kṛṣṇa. All names conclude with the "surname" *dāsa* for men or *dāsī* for women, appropriating what was originally a term of degradation and reframing it through an ethos of *sevā*, or service, to Kṛṣṇa. On this score, the identification with a birth-based high class status is critiqued through the prerogative of developing the ethics of humility and service toward the divine.

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[18] See Rochford (2007) for a discussion of ISKCON's transformation from a monastic to lay structure throughout the 1980s and 1990s. In regard to the ISKCON Chowpatty community in particular, according to a community database that I consulted for my research well over 90% of the community members live and work outside of the temple setting.

[19] A commitment to chant a prescribed number of Hare Kṛṣṇa *mantra*s and to abide by the "four regulative principles"—which include the maintenance of strict vegetarianism and an abstinence from intoxicants, gambling, and sexual activity outside of a heterosexual marital context—are the particular vows taken by each initiate within ISKCON's initiation process. Initiation in ISKCON does not necessitate the adoption of a monastic lifestyle but can be undertaken by any follower provided she or he abide by these injunctions.

However, the "brahmanical" as an aspirational value or ideal ethical code remains central to ISKCON's teachings. Lectures on the "ideal brahmanical culture," "how to develop brahmanical culture," and "cow protection as an integral part of brahmanical culture" appear in English, Hindi, and Tamil on ISKCON Chowpatty's primary lecture distribution website, ISKCON Desire Tree.[20] In one of these lectures, entitled "The Importance of Brahmin Initiation," the prominent ISKCON *saṁnyāsin* Bhaktirasamrita Swami, who attained a master's degree in business administration at Mumbai University before entering the *brahmacārī āśrama* at Chowpatty, describes the significance of ISKCON's initiation ceremonies:

> The scriptures explain that the spiritual master is like a transcendental touchstone, because he is supposed to make gold. How is that? Śrīla Prabhupāda [Bhaktivedānta] quoted this verse often, which explains that an alchemist knows how to convert bell metal into gold by adding some mercury and doing some other procedures. So similarly the process of initiation is like that. A person with a conditioned mentality is initiated and then becomes gold so to speak—he becomes a *brāhmaṇa,* he becomes twice-initiated or twice-born.[21]

This transformative process, possible through initiation by a *guru,* is seen within ISKCON contexts to possess the power to overturn one's socio-economic identity within the caste system and in this sense it is asserted as stronger than one's identity as determined by *karma.[22]* Yet while Bhaktirasamrita's discourse underscores the transformative power of the initiation process, through the instantiation of brahmanical symbols within the lexicon of ethical value the preeminence of the brahmanical is also underscored, even as its location is shifted from a basis in birth to a basis in personal characteristics and one's actions in this life.

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[20] "ISKCON Desire Tree" is an expansive archival website run from the temple's administrative offices by a small team of householder members and *brahmacārī*s, which uploads audio and audiovisual material from ISKCON Chowpatty and neighboring ISKCON communities on a daily basis. http://audio.ISKCONDesireTree.com (accessed July 4, 2016).

[21] Bhaktirasamrita Swami, "The Importance of Brahmin Initiation," lecture delivered at Bhaktivedanta Manor, London, December 7, 2014.

[22] Throughout the formal and informal encounters I had with Chowpatty members, the notion that one's socio-economic status was a result of past *karma* was asserted across the board. In this sense, the existence of caste categories was not challenged, although the importance of understanding that the *ātman,* or self, is ultimately beyond these categories was frequently underscored in lecture formats. For Chowpatty's members, *karma* is both determinative of one's conditions in this life but can also be overturned through initiation or the formal adoption of ISKCON's Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* tradition under the guidance of a *guru.*

Repeated assertions about the preeminence of the category of the brahmanical are also central to ISKCON Chowpatty's publically communicated identity.[23] A family's brahmanical identity, along with the purity it entails in dietary habits, still functions as a type of status symbol for many in the community. This was reinforced through conversations, as members from Marathi brahmin backgrounds or South Indian brahmin backgrounds would hold up information about their strict vegetarian diets as a mark of purity and a praiseworthy quality, emphasizing that they had never eaten "non-veg" food from childhood. As one doctor in the community, from a Marathi brahmin background, asserted decisively: "non-veg is out of my life and it will be out of my life forever." In this vein, Anuradha, one of the friendliest and most dynamic women with whom I spent time, mentioned that the "religious culture" of the South Indian brahmin household in which she grew up, including the *pūjās*, worship of ritual images, and ceremonies conducted by her family, oriented her well toward the lifestyle standards advocated by ISKCON's Mumbai temples communities. She mentioned that although some members of her extended family were concerned about her joining a new religious organization, her parents supported her decision. She reflected: "My parents always supported me for whatever I did, and because they were very pious and from a very cultured brahmin family, they saw that there's nothing wrong in what she's doing. It's just that she's going to the temple and she's studying Bhagavad Gītā."[24] Encoded in that statement, as in many others I heard, was a natural correspondence of culture (*saṁskṛti*) and piety with the framework of brahmanical identity. An administrator in the community's charitable hospital demonstrated a similar link. While talking about his childhood, he described that his family were a high caliber of Marwari brahmins, so they followed "a very high standard of living," which included strict dietary restrictions and the worship of Kṛṣṇa around the home. In fact, Jayati and Vrinda, two women in their mid-forties who have been longtime volunteers in the temple's *pūjā* services, reflected that ISKCON's dietary and lifestyle standards helped them to revive their families' brahmanical culture, which they lament has been dissipated through several generations of life in an industrialized city. They referred specifically to brahmanical eating and washing regulations, which are "not followed in Mumbai even by brahmins these days," and "men-women behavior," or the gender segregation norms observed in ISKCON communities, in which members are encouraged not to talk to members of the opposite sex in casual social situations and many events are segregated spatially. On all of these counts, ISKCON's community serves as a site to revive what are seen as lost brahmanical values within a city that does not encourage them.

However, for others in the community who were not born in brahmin families, ISKCON's invitation for all members to potentially *become* brahmins offers them a chance at upward mobility in social and religious registers. In a number of cases, those who were born in

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[23] As they were to Bhaktisiddhānta's proclamations within *Brahman O Vaiṣṇava* as well.

[24] Interview by author, Mumbai, January 19, 2013.

non-brahmin homes expressed a subtle resentment toward the brahmin priests they encountered in their youth, centering on the privileged access these brahmins had to performing Hindu rituals and the converse lack of access they felt they enjoyed in relation to their religious traditions. Krishnan, a marketing executive whose work took him between India and North America, explained this concisely:

> [At] a normal Hindu temple I would visit, nobody really explained in any of these temples what spiritual life is all about. You go, there's a *pujārī* [priest], you pay him some money, some *dakṣiṇā* [religious donation], and he does the *pūjā* on your behalf and that's it – maybe he gives you some *mahāprasāda* [consecrated food], but there is no other opportunity given to someone who is not from a brahmin family to progress in spiritual life. That's the best you could do – you offer some donations and get some *mahāprasāda*, and that's it. But then as I was hearing from devotees, I realized there is much more to spiritual life than just giving *dakṣiṇā*.[25]

In this case, joining ISKCON enabled Krishnan to take up an elite role in a religious tradition, circumventing the role of brahmins in conventional Hindu religious settings. Conversely, some of the brahmins who joined the Chowpatty community were met with censure from their families for bringing themselves under the religious guidance of those who were not brahmins—and in the case of ISKCON Chowpatty, a guru who was not Indian at all. Shivan, who grew up in a Tamil Iyer family, related: "My parents were flabbergasted—how could you take initiation from an American, you know? How can an American be your guru? You were born in a high caste brahmin family and you're getting initiation from an American! That was something that my mother found particularly very hard to digest."[26] For Shivan, joining a transnational religious organization in which Americans and Europeans were prominent gurus posed a challenge "from the society's point of view and directly from the parents." He could however rationalize his religious choices to his parents, based on the modern Gauḍīya reinterpretation of *varṇāśrama-dharma,* and he gradually influenced his mother to not only accept his choice but actually take initiation from that same American guru as well.

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[25] Interview by author, Mumbai, December 14, 2013.

[26] Interview by author, Mumbai, December 13, 2013. An additional concern—for both some conservative brahmin families who have joined ISKCON centers and some zealous non-Indian converts within ISKCON—has been the greater ritual roles accorded to women in ISKCON centers in North America and Europe, as well as occasionally in some Indian ISKCON centers with higher proportions of European-American members. This is less of a concern within ISKCON Chowpatty however, as women do not typically lead religious rituals outside of homosocial contexts. As will be discussed below, the Counselling System by contrast enables the institutionalization of a space for women in the community to assume a level of lived religious authority that is not seen as a challenge to the maintenance of the general patriarchal values espoused within ISKCON communities.

The appropriation of the category of the "brahmanical" in ISKCON Chowpatty, and its relation to but distinction from birth-based brahmanical identity, are grounded in the reinterpretation of *varṇāśrama-dharma* pursued by a specific lineage of modern Gauḍīya reformers in late colonial Calcutta, as described above. Their revisioning of *varṇāśrama-dharma,* while complicated by ISKCON's transnational expansion and the incorporation of non-Indian practitioners and gurus into the religious organization, is also mediated with different connotations within ISKCON's Indian centers, wherein ISKCON followers negotiate both their birth-based caste identity and their efforts to embody the ideal of *varṇāśrama-dharma* put forward by Bhaktisiddhānta and Bhaktivedānta. While I have focused until now on the centrality of the category of the "brahmanical" in their religious and ethical valuations, the members of ISKCON Chowpatty have affected another significant change in revisioning *varṇāśrama-dharma* for modern Gauḍīya communities.

Counselling Devotees in a Secular City

In Chowpatty, the context in which a discussion of *daiva varṇāśrama-dharma* predominantly appears is in relation to the community's Counselling System. This system is described in detail in the internally circulated temple publication, "A Report on the Social Development Programme at Radha Gopinath Temple," written in the late 1990s by several temple administrators to centralize the community's distinctive congregation system. This source also serves to record a type of internal mission statement, providing a glance at how the Chowpatty administration understands the development of the community.[27] From the late 1990s onward, the Counselling System became a trademark structure of the Chowpatty community. Counsellors typically meet with their counsellees once every fortnight, generally in private homes but sometimes also clustered in groups on the temple property. Most counsellors I interviewed estimated that they included between fifteen to twenty families, a total of around fifty people, in their Counselling groups. Meetings tend to be far more informal than the weekly temple-based religious programs. They are often structured with *kīrtana* (religious chanting) and an informal discussion among the group, led by the counsellors, on a theme related to "Vaiṣṇava etiquette" or the ethical orientations members strive to develop alongside their membership in the ISKCON community.

In the "Report on the Social Development Programme," the term used to describe a number of the temple's community projects, "social development," is described to fit within the overarching social structure of *daivī varṇāśrama-dharma*, tying it to the social philosophy developed in Bhaktisiddhānta's line of Gauḍīyas. [28] *Daivī,* or *daiva,*

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[27] This information is based on interviews with the financial administrators of the temple and on an in-house Chowpatty temple publication, "A Report on the Social Development Programme at Radha Gopinath Temple" (Radha Gopinath Mandir [n.d.]).

[28] *Daivī* is a popular ISKCON variant for the grammatically correct *daiva.*

varṇāśrama-dharma is elaborated in the document as a "Vedic system" of "social organization with a spiritual perspective."[29] This distinctly modern Gauḍīya spin on *varṇāśrama* asserts that all *varṇa-* and *āśrama*-related duties point to a religious core, what the manual describes as the ultimate goal: *viṣṇur ārādhyate*, "to offer worship to Viṣṇu."[30] In this light, the text declares: "For a society to be strong, all members must know their duties."[31] However, intriguingly, these duties are then elaborated with almost no reference to *varṇa* categories, but rather through an extended discussion of the Counselling System. Radhanath Swami, the resident guru of the Chowpatty community, reiterates this link in a set of lectures entitled "The Spiritual Counselling System" by noting: "we tried to implement this spirit of *varṇāśrama* in our social development programs . . . In essence, *daivī varṇāśrama-dharma* is to educate people—according to their nature and propensity—to utilize their talents in the service of God, to develop pure love of God."[32]

This description neatly avoids the messy and problematic aspects involved in proposing to reform a stratified socio-economic system, which in its Indian context would theoretically involve young adults electing their respective *varṇa*s and then entering into non-exploitative working relationships with one another in a social structure parallel but wholly outside of the often caste-based Indian society outside. It furthers a decoupling of birth and socio-occupational duty that can be traced back to the reformulations of *varṇāśrama* in the writings of Bhaktisiddhānta and Bhaktivedānta. Additionally, through not mentioning *varṇa* categorization but rather focusing on *āśrama* categorization, the creative development of the Counselling System as a broad education-based "essence" of *varṇāśrama* then shifts the language of discourse to that of care and educational training.[33] In this register, the focus on where an individual should be situated within a larger socio-economic system becomes a discussion of whether that individual is better suited to a life of renunciation, among the several hundred *brahmacārī*s within the *brahmacārī āśrama* on ISKCON Chowpatty's grounds, or whether one feels more suited for householder life, which can be arranged through the temple's Marriage Board, a group of seven congregation members who maintain a database of the congregational members

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[29] Radha Gopinath Mandir (2012), 2.

[30] Cited from the Viṣṇu Purāṇa 3.8.8 and also elaborated in the *Caitanya Caritāmṛta* 2.8.58.

[31] Radha Gopinath Mandir (2012), 2.

[32] Radhanath Swami, "Caring for Devotees: The Spiritual Counselor System," the Dandavats website, September 15, 2015, http://www.dandavats.com/?p=1378 (accessed July 4, 2016).

[33] Anna King (2007) notes a similar softening and abstracting of *varṇāśrama* ideals within ISKCON in Britain, which is noteworthy due to the close networks of ISKCON communities within the Mumbai and London temples in particular.

seeking spouses.[34] In other words, a discussion of *varṇa* categorization is downplayed while one's placement in a particular *āśrama*, as a stage of life, is presented not as a set progression intended for all upper class male members of the community but rather as a lifestyle choice made in consultation with one's counsellor.[35]

In the Chowpatty temple's early development in the late 1980s and 1990s, the congregation developed alongside close personal guidance from its resident guru, the Jewish-American born Radhanath Swami. However, as the community began expanding beyond its small-scale beginnings, Radhanath Swami began encouraging elder members of the congregation to develop mentoring relationships with younger members of the Chowpatty congregation. This history, told to me by many of the core community managers, is repeated in narrative form in written documents, and it forms part of the established narrative of the Chowpatty temple's history and success. Each "counsellor" is generally a husband-wife team who are perpetuated as counselling authorities on the basis of their own perceived success within the community in both religious and familial life and their seniority of membership. As in the gendered division of temple-based courses and programs, the centrality of the heterosexual couple to the Counselling System reinforces a heteronormative family basis to the community. This celebrates and incorporates the lived authority of women more than in other, strictly male-based ISKCON authority structures; however, it also locates that legitimate authority in the context of a normalized, community-sanctioned heterosexual marriage. For many counsellees, their counsellor couple provides a semblance of parental guidance, as counsellees turn to counsellors to seek advice they may have previously sought from their parents, whose authority is now evaluated through its resonance with ISKCON teachings. Here, an insulated social environment enables the production of an alternative community, offering members close-knit relationships with elder devotees in what is often likened to a family structure. One third-generation congregation member who recently finished junior college, says she found an affirming, family-like support from the *brahmacārī* who acted as an informal counsellor for the children previously enrolled in the temple's grade school: "For us, he is actually a father. We can tell him anything. . . . And he doesn't discriminate

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[34] This database was estimated to have about 2,000 users as of late 2014.

[35] Within this set of options, male members may hypothetically choose between the four classical *āśrama*s, provided they have the support of their counsellors and other elders in the community to confirm their eligibility for each stage. Male individuals who desire to enter the *brahmacārī āśrama* are subject to a rigorous internal screening process, and those who desire to enter the *saṃnyāsa āśrama* are further subject to an extensive review process that is centralized under the supervision of ISKCON's Governing Body Commission (GBC). Female members, by contrast, are guided toward the *gṛhastha āśrama*, or the householder stage of life, but may occasionally also enter the *vānaprastha āśrama,* a stage of partial renunciation within a familial or community context. While these options are also available to ISKCON members globally, they acquire local variations in practice. ISKCON Chowpatty prides itself on the maintenance of an extensively institutionalized process of screening and vetting for community-sanctioned entrance into any of these stages of life.

between boys and girls. . . . He'll give equal importance to us and equal importance to them."[36] While she also tells me that she does not frequent the temple as much as she would like—and prefers to spend her time these days preparing studying for her college classes and hanging out with friends—the formalized contact with her counsellor provides a tangible link to ISKCON as an institution; it keeps her in the system, literally and figuratively.

The familial resonances in the structure reproduced through the Counselling System also provide an opportunity for social belonging among those community members who have migrated to Mumbai for college or work and who are living in the city often at great distances from their biological families. In this regard, regular contact with individual counsellors and meetings at their homes can serve to (re)create structures and locations of a personal community that may otherwise be difficult to develop in an unfamiliar urban geography. Counselling relationships are also powerful sites for the communication of values and ethical orientations. Younger householder couples are counselled by elder householders, assigned generally on the basis of geographical proximity, though sometimes in light of linguistic and socio-economic similarities or prior personal relationships. Conversely, *brahmacārī*s are counselled by other, more elder *brahmacārī*s. Though basic guidelines demarcate these groups, they are often also formed through shared language, occupational similarities, or class lines, reinforced through the social similarities of those who share certain postcodes. While new congregation members are free to choose their counsellors, they are encouraged to find a "good fit" for them both geographically and culturally. In this setting, glossing the "essence" of *varṇāśrama-dharma* as the Counselling System both depoliticizes its persistent relation to lived caste categories while also encouraging new social links that can at times overlay an institutionalized religious authority onto existing social hierarchies. Concomitantly, frequent allusions to family roles in members' descriptions of the Counselling System also communicate a dislocation of the family structure itself from a strictly biological frame and the relocation of it in these new social networks.

As of July 2015, the Counselling System has also expanded to online networks accessible for international consultations. A new E-Counseling service was advertised through the community's audiovisual media hub, "ISKCON Desire Tree," which offers the opportunity for a "Live Chat with ISKCON Desire Tree E-Counselor for Spiritual Guidance," with separate counselors for males and females available for consultation between 10am and 10pm India-time daily.[37] In all of these cases, religious fulfillment in Chowpatty's community membership is packaged and presented as a reproducible system, a product that can be commodified in diverse modern landscapes through adherence to certain

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[36] Interview by author, Mumbai, May 14, 2014.

[37] "Welcome to E-Counseling," the ISKCON Desire Tree website, February 1, 2016, http://www.iskcondesiretree.com/profiles/blogs/e-counseling (accessed May 15, 2016).

principles of community care and training. This elasticity of this reproducibility also enables ISKCON to extend its notions of who can serve as a religious authority—in other words, who can convey spiritual guidance on the "spirit of *varṇāśrama*."

The successful reproduction of a counselling group is also linked to efficiency in training; that is, that every member should receive "systematic training in Krishna Consciousness."[38] This is underscored within an in-house description of the purposes of the Counsellor System, which are laid out systematically. The first few stated purposes concern the aims: "to educate and train married devotees to live according to the Krishna Conscious principles of the *gṛhastha* ashram" and "to provide systematic training to devotees in matters of philosophy, *sādhana*, and Vaiṣṇava behaviour."[39] These aspects are then supplemented with the next two aims: "to provide a formal framework within which personal care and attention can be extended to all devotees so as to make them feel loved and wanted and part of a wonderful spiritual family" and "to foster warm personal relationships and a spirit of love and trust among devotees based on Krishna Conscious principles."[40] These purposes seem to indicate a genealogy somewhat separate from aspirations toward *varṇāśrama-dharma* altogether; indeed, a purpose more situated either in response to or for prevention of a lack of interpersonal care or individual personal fulfilment in Chowpatty's religious community. However, in this system of advocating holistic care for ISKCON's devotees, training is undeniably central to one's holistic well-being and the system is highly institutionalized—a structure which is not without its critics among Mumbai's own ISKCON members. Yet the Counselling System is premised on a certain logic that, through a reproducible model of care for individual community members, a parallel training of the self can deliver comparable contentment for each individual. Principles of marketing efficient, reproducible results undergird this understanding of community development.

This emphasis relates crucially to both the missionizing imperative of this congregational structure and the idea that community is maintained through systematic education. However, it also reframes the notion that a proper way of being within the *daiva varṇāśrama-dharma* system is through the cultivation of certain qualities, specifically the ethical framework conceived in descriptions of ideal "brahmanical" qualities.[41] This is seen

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[38] Radha Gopinath Mandir [n.d.]: 34.

[39] Radha Gopinath Mandir [n.d.]: 3.

[40] Radha Gopinath Mandir [n.d.]: 3.

[41] I use the term "cultivation" here—common in descriptions of religious progress within ISKCON—with an awareness of its horticultural connotations, which are explicitly invoked in several formative Gauḍīya texts as metaphors for the development of *bhakti,* as I have discussed in a prior publication (Robison 2012). This understanding of religious practice as a process that requires careful cultivation informs contemporary ISKCON understandings of living in a modern city and engenders attitudes of reservation toward the secularizing aspects of India's urbanization.

as particularly necessary in the urban context of Mumbai, which is depicted as a dangerous place for one's spiritual advancement by many of Chowpatty's members. In this regard, a number of counsellors advocate that members regulate the modes of their engagement with the city outside the confines of ISKCON's community contexts. This includes varying amounts of anxiety expressed over the influence of Mumbai's secular media culture—including the Hindi cinema industry as well as the increasing normalcy of watching television and using the internet as modes of recreation. For particularly devout members, the sphere of mobility for a member who is strictly adhering to the lifestyle of an ISKCON devotee should exclude spaces in the city and even social occasions that are not in some way related to the cultivation of their religious life or to a missionizing agenda—a challenge for those who seek a religious life alongside a modern secular context rather than in place of it.[42]

Key tenets of modern religious traditionalism conveyed in ISKCON Chowpatty are directly informed by the religious traditionalism of the gurus who reformulated Gauḍīya Vaiṣnavism within colonial-era Bengal. However, Chowpatty's brand of traditionalism and its underlying discourse of suspicion toward secular modernity also exist in dialogue with a number of contemporary religious communities in India, both within and outside of the Hindu fold. While Chowpatty's religious traditionalism is formed by some of the same societal currents discussed in Christopher Fuller's (2003) analysis of the interplay between categories of modernity and traditionalism in the Minakshi temple community in Madurai, ISKCON's urban communities represent a different take on both the nature of religious traditions and the processes through which they are mediated due to the intensely transnational orientation of their religious institution. ISKCON engages in ongoing processes of both the deterritorialization and reterritorialization of Gauḍīya Vaiṣnavism through ushering its multiethnic and multicaste members into a revisioned brahmanical socio-religious taxonomy. However, the global orientation and the eclectic nature of these processes are markedly different from other prominent transnational religious organizations that are also active in some of the same urban centers in which ISKCON's largest temples have developed. In contrast to what Tulasi Srinivas describes as a self-consciously syncretic approach to devotion practiced by contemporary Sathya Sai Baba devotees,[43] ISKCON devotees explicitly affirm that their role in urban India is to represent a unitary *paramparā,* religious lineage, and to champion the revival of an idealized Vedic Vaiṣnava tradition over against the perceived imposition of Westernizing secularization within India's urban centers.

In this dichotomous view of life in Mumbai, members accord centrality to a concerted training of the self—particularly the self-in-community—and aim to produce a model of

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[42] I plan to discuss this issue further in a forthcoming work.

[43] Srinivas (2010), 179.

pure Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* through the practice of a range of personal and community-based religious rituals and lifestyle restrictions. Therein, the Counselling System draws from its foundation in *varṇāśrama* categories in seeking to reproduce an idealized and structured form of a religiously oriented society. However, more immediately, Chowpatty's Counselling System provides a space for the cultivation of an alternative modernity among Chowpatty's members—drawing on globalized tropes of self-care and legitimizing discourses of education but applying them to a renewed construction of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava community. By retaining the categories of *varṇāśrama* but untying them from a birth-based hereditary framework—at least ideologically—the doorway is open for *anyone* to become a representative of the Gauḍīya *paramparā.* According to this system, if it is possible for anyone to adopt the practices of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*, then it is also possible for individuals to participate in a revisioned *varṇāśrama-dharma* system within a modernized setting in Mumbai—both "brahmins by birth" and "brahmins by character."

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Daily Pūjā: Moralizing Dharma in the BAPS Swaminarayan Hindu Tradition

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Abstract

Each morning most members of BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, a transnational Hindu tradition, perform a personal devotional ritual called *nityapūjā* in which they engage in both somatic and cognitive practices for about half an hour. Drawing from the ethnographic data collected at the San Jose chapter of BAPS and mapping it onto a theory of normative ethics, this paper examines how such religious rituals help their practitioners negotiate secular concerns and conditions, come to terms with stress and anxiety, and make sense of their spiritual experiences. It proposes a ritual-moral model that provides a holistic approach to rethinking the time-worn category "dharma" as an ethical analytic in the context of how Hinduism is reimagined and lived in the 21st century. By exploring the relationship between Hindu devotional rituals and everyday ethics of their practitioners, this model demonstrates how ritually informed ethics create possibilities for exercising moral agency, developing constructive intersubjectivities, and managing sociocultural factors.

Keywords: BAPS, ethics, ritual performance, Swaminarayan Sanstha, modernity, transnationalism

"In my field, egotism works," Heena Dave[1], a corporate attorney in San Jose, expressed. "Almost everyone employs it to win cases. It is commonplace to show your authority and superiority, butt heads, assert yourself, and work your way through. There is no place to politeness in this work culture. However, my work ethics changed when I worked on this medico-legal case for a county in northern California" (Dave 2015).

After graduating from the University of California at Berkeley in 2012, Heena was hired by a prestigious law firm. Her first assignment was to defend a Californian county on a case that had not been resolved for many years. A prisoner, a former gangster, had

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[1] 'Heena Dave' is a pseudonym so as to preserve anonymity.

filed a lawsuit against the county, alleging that he developed paralysis in the county prison due to the diagnostic negligence of the county's prison doctor. While painstakingly reading the stacks of documents and listening to the interrogation tapes, Heena accidentally discovered a potentially case-winning clue. Based on this hint, she cross-examined the inmate and figured that he was concealing information about the treatment he sought and received from non-county doctors, who were not defendants in the case. Once Heena revealed this information to her senior associates, they tried to obtain the prescription documents in question from the plaintiff's law firm through the conventional means of legal requests for production. Even after many hostile and acrimonious exchanges between the two opposing law firms, the documents were not delivered by the plaintiff's attorney. Heena's firm finally asked for judicial intervention to acquire the documents they had a legal right to obtain; however, even the court refused to interfere in this inter-firm, interpersonal conflict, and advised them to "learn to work with each other."

While all this was happening, Heena, a follower of the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha (henceforth, BAPS), had been praying daily for this case in her morning ritual of *nityapūjā*. She engaged in a one-way conversation with the *mūrtis* (laminated paper images) of "Bhagwan Swaminarayan and her guru Pramukh Swami Maharaj," about how the case was proceeding and how badly she needed their divine intervention to win the case. She was extremely disappointed when the court refused to assist in the acquisition of the critical prescriptions by the non-county doctors. In the next day's *nityapūjā* conversation, she took out all her frustration on "Maharaj and Swami," that is, God and guru, and furiously complained that they did not listen to her months-long prayers. Later, though, while she was performing *pancānga praṇāma*, a ritual of prostrating before God, guru, and her parents, Heena felt as if Pramukh Swami Maharaj was softly suggesting to her, "if you can humbly prostrate here in your *pūjā*, why can't you extend that same humility in your professional work? You need not prostrate before your colleagues or competitors, but you could at least show some humility and genuine respect to them."

Heena ignored this suggestion as her imagination or hallucination. And, for the next few days, every time she complained about them not helping her, she felt that she was suggested the same thing again and again. Eventually, she decided to give it a try. She called the secretary of the opposing firm, sincerely apologized for her assertive approach and arrogant behavior, and expressed her wish to collaboratively resolve this case. The opposing firm was naturally suspicious of her intentions and did not respond at all. Even her own colleagues and seniors disapproved this newfound, unassuming approach and often derided her for the same. Nonetheless, Heena persisted working in this manner for a few weeks, constantly drawing strength from her morning *nityapūjā* ritual and her perceived conversation with "Maharaj and Swami." Over time, she was able to develop a cordial relationship with the opposing firm and acquire the disputed prescription documents. The plaintiff was then presented to a prestigious Stanford

hospital for cross-examination and second opinion. He was then diagnosed with Neuromyelitis Optica, an extremely rare disease that leaves most of its victims largely or completely paralyzed after the first myelitis attack. It could have possibly developed due to incompatible medicines prescribed by multiple doctors unaware of each other's prescription. Through this evidence, Heena won the case for the county. This incident, however, drastically transformed Heena's interpersonal paradigm and moral outlook towards others.

This story provokes many questions about the ways in which Hindu religious rituals create their practitioners' everyday ethics and experiences, especially in the context of the contemporary transnational milieu. For example, how are Hindu rituals reformed to adapt to the increasingly modernized, globalized, diversified world? How are they enacted by individuals for their moral formation and by institutions for their followers' "ethical subjectivation" (Foucault 1988; 1997)? To what extent do such religious rituals help their practitioners negotiate secular concerns and conditions, come to terms with stress and anxiety, and make sense of their spiritual and religious experiences? How, if at all, do such lived practices reshape the conception of *dharma* in the terms of self-reflection, self-cultivation, and self-constitution?

Addressing some of these questions, this article examines how devotional rituals and religious practices shape, and are shaped by, their practitioners' everyday ethics, concerns, and actions. Drawing from the ethnographic data collected primarily at the San Jose chapter of BAPS and mapping those findings onto a theory of normative ethics, it proposes a ritual-moral model that provides a holistic approach to understanding this journal's theme of *The Moralizing of Dharma in Everyday Hinduisms*. This model helps rethink the time-worn category "*dharma*" as an analytic concept in the context of how 21st-century Hinduism is reimagined and lived in the daily life of BAPS devotees in the United States. By exploring the relationship between Hindu devotional rituals and everyday ethics of their practitioners, this model further demonstrates how ritually informed ethics create possibilities for exercising moral agency, developing constructive intersubjectivities, and negotiating sociocultural factors, as was evident above in Heena's engagement with *nityapūjā*.

A Brief Introduction to Nityapūjā: *The Lived Understanding of Ethics in BAPS*

The devotional ritual of *nityapūjā*, which prompted Heena to reshape her moral outlook, is performed daily by more than a million members of the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, a Hindu religious movement that has spread globally in the last four decades and can be found in contexts as diverse as the Adivasi (tribal) communities in rural India to the second-generation Indian diaspora in North America. Each morning, after having bathed but prior to eating, drinking, or engaging in any other activity, most members of BAPS perform *nityapūjā*, often called just *pūjā*, a personal form of ritual worship in which they engage both somatic and cognitive practices for about half an hour. Unlike most forms

of *pūjā* in which a deity, a guru, or an ascetic is publicly worshipped, BAPS *nityapūjā* is a private ritual in which each practitioner owns a personal set of *mūrtis* (laminated images) to be worshipped. BAPS considers this ritual as a part of everyday *dharma*, reinterpreted in terms of "*sadācāra*," righteous or good conduct.

Swaminarayan, the eponymous founder of the Swaminarayan Hindu tradition of which BAPS is the largest denomination, writes in his book of moral, spiritual, and devotional conduct, the *Śikṣāpatrī*, "*dharmo jñeyaḥ sadācāraḥ*," that is, knowing and engaging in good conduct is *dharma* (verse 103; Swami 2014). Pramukh Swami Maharaj, Swaminarayan's fifth spiritual successor and BAPS's penultimate leader, enhances this conception of *dharma* by reimagining it in terms of human harmony, required especially in the modern-day milieu of divisive dissonance. Grounding *dharma* at the grassroots, he emphasizes that "Dharma is only one – humanity and sadachar… Dharma is that which spreads love for one another" (BAPS 2016). This reimagination and moralization of *dharma* is repeatedly reinforced by BAPS members in their everyday ritual of *nityapūjā*, which many respondents consider as their "daily dose of practical *dharma* and *bhakti* (devotion)," imbibed through their "personal appointment with God and guru." I will now briefly delineate various somatic and cognitive components[2] of *nityapūjā* in the order in which they are usually performed by most devotees (A. BAPS 2001; P. BAPS 2011).

1. *Prāṇayāma*: The well-known breathing yoga exercise of *prāṇayāma* to clear worldly thoughts and calm one's mind in order to concentrate on the *pūjā* ritual.
2. *Ātma-vicāra*: The meditation practice in which the practitioner contemplates on the self as an eternal, imperishable, pure, and blissful soul (*ātman*). In accordance with BAPS's ontological and metaphysical worldviews, the practitioner also attempts to identify the self with *Akṣara* or *Brahman*, which is the transcendental abode of supreme divinity and ultimate reality *Puruṣottama* or *Parabrahman*.
3. *Paramātma-vicāra*: The meditation practice in which the practitioner develops her or his theological understanding of and devotional commitment to *Paramātmā*, that is *Puruṣottama* or *Parabrahman*, by contemplating on *Parabrahman*'s divine form, glory, qualities, and blissfulness.
4. *Mānasī*: The meditation practice of offering loving devotion to *Brahman* (that is, guru) and *Parabrahman* (that is, God) in which the practitioner mentally serves them and recollects their *darśanas*.
5. *Tilak-cāndalo* for men and *cāndalo* for women: The practice of applying sacred marks with the sandalwood paste and vermilion on one's forehead, two upper arms, and chest for men; and with only vermilion on the forehead for women.

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[2] Anthropologist of religion Hanna Kim (2013) has elaborately described various steps of *nityapūjā* in her chapter, "Devotional Expressions in the Swaminarayan Community," in *Contemporary Hinduism,* ed. P. Pratap Kumar (Durham, UK: Acumen), 126-37.

6. *Āvāhanam Mantra*: The practice of placing *mūrtis* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and guru *paramparā*, the lineage of five BAPS gurus—Gunatitanand Swami, Bhagatji Maharaj, Shastriji Maharaj, Yogiji Maharaj, and currently Pramukh Swami Maharaj, who are believed by BAPS to be successors of Bhagwan Swaminarayan—on an *āsana*, a woolen or silky cloth, and reciting the *āvāhanam mantra* to invite them to reside in the arranged *mūrtis* during the *pūjā* ritual.

7. *Mālā*: The practice of doing rosary while chanting the "Swaminarayan" *mantra* and doing *darśana* (seeing and being seen) of *mūrtis* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and guru *paramparā*.

8. *Pradakṣiṇā*: The practice of circumambulating the *mūrtis* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and guru *paramparā* in a clockwise direction.

9. *Daṇḍavat* for men and *Pancānga praṇāma* for women: The practice of prostrating before the *mūrtis* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, guru *paramparā*, and one's parents. The *daṇḍavat* includes touching of eight limbs and the *pancānga praṇāma* five limbs on the ground as a physical act symbolizing submission to God.

10. *Prārthanā*: Personal prayers for material, spiritual, and devotional concerns.

11. *Vāncana*: Reading sacred texts of Swaminarayan tradition such as the *Śikṣāpatrī*, a book of moral conduct and religious norms, the *Yogī Gītā*, the *Vacanāmrut*, and the *Svāmīnī Vāto*.

12. *Visthāpana Mantra*: At the end of the *pūjā* ritual, the practitioner recites the *visthāpana* mantra to request Bhagwan Swaminarayan and gurus to depart from the *mūrtis* and reside in her or his soul until the next *pūjā*.

As it is evident from these steps, an important aspect of *nityapūjā* is its highly personal and personalized nature. In contrast to Emile Durkheim's (1976) conception of religious ritual as the fundamental source of the "collective conscience" that binds individuals into a community, or Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw's understanding of ritual as a nonintentional "ontological stipulation" (1994, 96), the ritual of *nityapūjā* is both individualized and intentional action designed for self-willed association with spirituality and divinity. Like other such rituals, *nityapūjā* both symbolizes and embodies multifarious correlations between "the human" and "the divine," the seemingly incongruent categories that coexist and work together in the "grammar of devotion" (Eck 1998). Such a ritualization, Catherine Bell argues in her seminal work, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, "not only involves the setting up of oppositions, but through the privileging built into such an exercise, it generates hierarchical schemes to produce a loose sense of totality and systematicity. In this way, ritual dynamics afford an experience of 'order' as well as the 'fit' between this taxonomic order and the real world of experience" (1992, 104).

In case of *nityapūjā*, the taxonomic order is not only negotiated by the spatial and temporal leeway allowed in performing this ritual but also by its emotional, devotional, and spiritual characteristics that lend it pliability and adaptability in its daily performance. Devotional cognitive practices such as *mānasī* and *paramātma-vicāra*, for

example, are essentially imaginative and subjective, and hence vary in both the duration for and intensity with which they are performed by different practitioners. Even for the same practitioner, they often vary from day to day. Many devotees, for example, tailor their *nityapūjā* components, especially the cognitive ones, according to the time available on a particular morning. Even for the bodily components such as doing *mālā*, the data significantly diverges in both the number of *mālās* done and the time taken to do them. In my dataset of 22 interviews and 75 survey responses, the number of *mālās* performed during *nityapūjā* varies from 5 to 60, and the time devoted for *mālā* varies from 3 to 30 minutes. Nidhi, for example, takes about 20 minutes to do 11 *mālā*, whereas Roshni takes about 10 minutes to do 60 *mālā*, and for Mahesh and many others, the speed at which the *pūjā* is performed is proportional to how late they are running for their job. These sorts of variations are naturally more observable in the creatively configured cognitive components.

From the ethnographic narratives of these participants, it also became apparent that the quantitative and qualitative variations in different components of *nityapūjā* are intricately intertwined with the practitioners' ethical and spiritual coordinates. In most cases, their moral compasses, decisions, and actions are noticeably modulated by the time dedicated to various ritualistic practices and the intensity with which they are performed. These practices appreciably influence and are influenced by the ways their practitioners frame, discuss, understand, and employ ethics and morality in their everyday lives. Several studies have corroborated this mutual influence by examining how moral reasoning and judgment are related with cultural traditions and religious practices (cf. Lukes 2008; Velleman 2013). Although early influential theorists such as Plato (2013) and Kant (1999) ignored the significant role played by indigenous traditions, theological beliefs, and religious practices in the moral formation of an individual, in recent years, scholars have focused on exploring their correlations (Gert 1989). For example, Joan Miller (2001; 2005) and Ashiq Ali Shah (2004) have demonstrated that youth's moral behavior is significantly shaped by their personal religious beliefs and practices.

In this vein, I will examine how Hindu rituals, which form a key part of lived Hinduism, act as an analytical concept in the everyday life. Drawing from the ethnographic data of *nityapūjā* and the theological and ontological beliefs of its practitioners, I will map their embodied emotions and ethics onto what Richard Shweder, Jonathan Haidt, and their collaborators call the "Big Three" ethics: the Ethics of Autonomy; the Ethics of Community; and the Ethics of Divinity (1997). This theory is particularly relevant to my data collected in a Hindu community, for, based on their fieldwork in the city of Bhubaneswar, India, Shweder et el. not only augmented the understanding of the applied ethics but also gave intriguing insights about the Hindu ethics. For example, they contend that the "Hindu ethical worldview is incomplete without any of the three" (141). While these three ethical discourses enhance human dignity and self-esteem, they often come into conflict with one another and create moral dilemmas.

Nonetheless, as narratives of my interlocutors attest, these conflicts are often used as "opportunities for personal ethical discrimination and spiritual growth" (141). Moreover, as an extension of the Big Three of morality, Jonathan Haidt and Craig Joseph developed the "moral foundation theory" in which they claim that each culture constructs virtues, narratives, and institutions on top of "several innate and universally available psychological systems [that] are the foundations of intuitive ethics" (2004, XXX). Such systems can help understand how Hindu morality and "intuitive ethics" are intricately related with the everyday dharmic rituals and practices, and, thereby, reimagine the age-old idea of *dharma* in the context of the present-day normative ethics and applied ethics, particularly what Michael Lambek calls "ordinary ethics" (2010).

Although the theory of Big Three ethics and its corollaries enjoy a considerable following in the Western philosophy of ethics, there are, of course, limitations and challenges to them. For example, the diverse moral formations effected by religious rituals cannot be comprehensively encompassed by the Big Three ethics and, therefore, such attempts invariably produce reductive and circumscribed accounts. Moreover, ethics are essentially fluid and, hence, should not be compartmentalized in the watertight categories such as ethics of autonomy, community, and divinity. Nonetheless, my purpose in employing this theory for rethinking *dharma* as an ethical analytic is threefold: first, to employ its theoretical derivations in order to understand the moral dimensions of Hindu devotional rituals that form one of the important parts of *lived dharma*; second, to develop a sophisticated tool for analyzing the relationship between theological doctrines, normative precepts, and religious practices in the context of everyday Hinduism; and third, to enhance the theory of Big Three of morality itself by integrating into it the somatic and cognitive dimensions of Hindu religious rituals. Such a revivified theory could be useful in grasping the role, function, and significance of Hindu *dharmic* practices in the moral formation, self-cultivation, and self-realization of their practitioners (cf. Heifetz's article in this volume).

Within the abovementioned limiting factors, I now build a ritual-moral model upon the theory of Big Three ethics in order to analyze the relationship between the ritualistic parameters and moral functions of *nityapūjā*. In Figure 1, 'Somatic Components' on the X-axis correspond, in terms of high and low, to both quantitative and qualitative degrees to which bodily components of the *pūjā*, such as applying *tilaka-cāndalo* (sacred marks) and doing *mālā* (rosary), *daṇḍavat* (prostration), and *pradakṣiṇā* (circumambulation) are routinely and religiously followed. A high degree on the X-axis indicates relatively more regular and intensive repetition of bodily practices. Similarly, 'Cognitive Components' on the Y-axis correspond to the time, attention, and consideration given to the cognitive components of *nityapūjā* such as the practices of *prārthanā* (offering prayers), *ātma-vicāra* (meditating upon the true nature of the self), and *paramātma-vicāra* (contemplating on the divine form and glory of God).

In this mapping, each moral value or reason that an informant invokes is usually coded into one of the Big Three ethics. It is, however, often observed that many informants relate a single ethical concern, decision, or action with multiple ritual components and moral values, and hence it needs to be placed in multiple categories. In order to accommodate the diversity and complexity of people's moral compass, the placement is guided by a coding manual developed by Lene Arnett Jensen[3] and the five moral clusters and its constituents narrated by Jonathan Haidt and his collaborators[4]. These guidelines allow for an assessment of the degree to which a person uses each of the three ethics or five clusters, and help distinguish not only among different types of ethics but also among different types of moral concepts and concerns within each ethic.
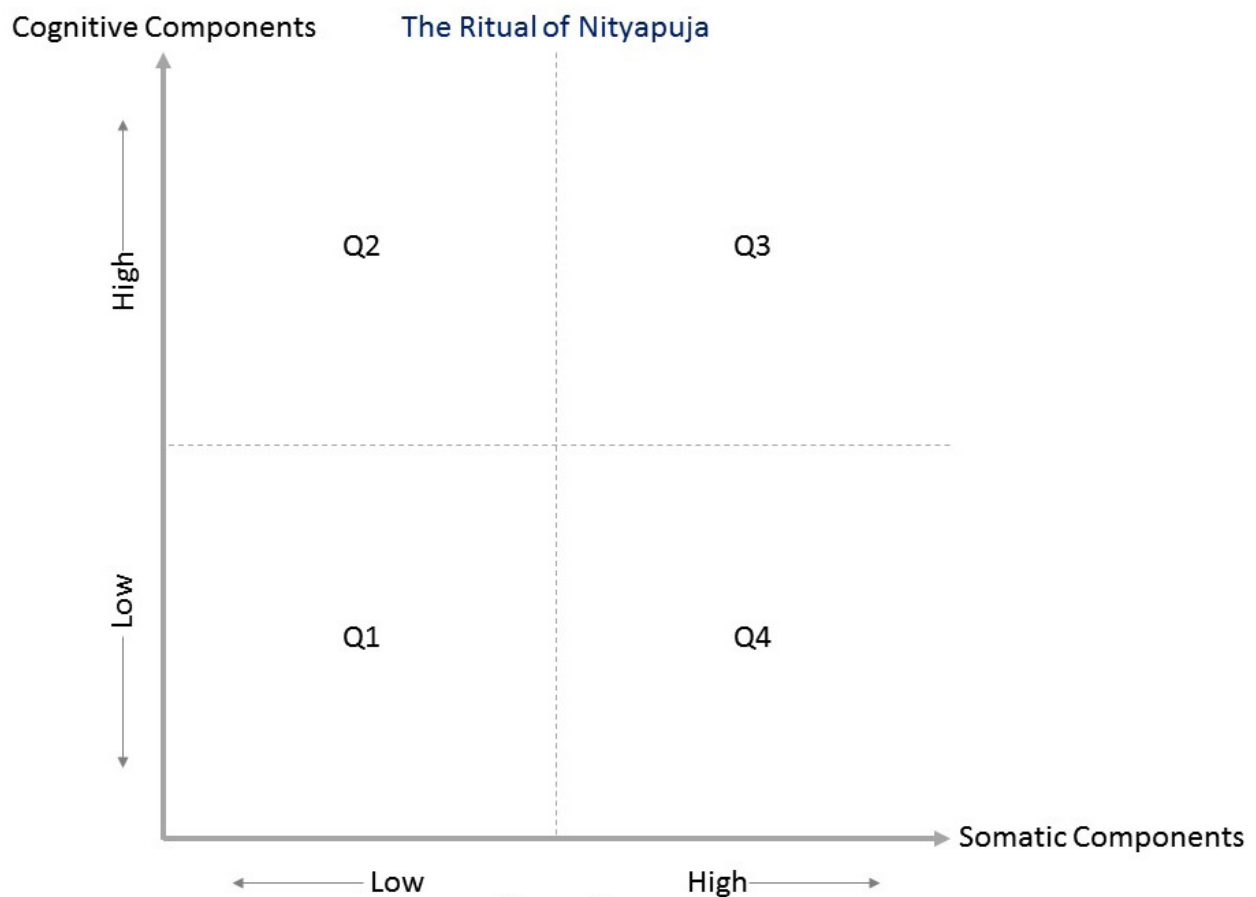

Figure 1

Before presenting a testable model derived from the superimposition of my ethnographic data onto the somatic and cognitive components and related ethics in the above graph, I will delineate the key components of the Big Three of ethics theory and

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[3] The manual is available on Lene Arnett Jensen's website www.lenearnettjensen.com under the section 'Three Ethics Measures.'

[4] The clusters are available on the website www.moralfoundations.org.

show its connection with the Hindu concept of *dharma*. Based on their cross-cultural research among various communities in India and the USA, Shweder and his collaborators argued that different societies value different cultural values, social rules, community duties, and religious practices, all of which influence individuals' moral norms and judgments (1997; 2003). In a study that originally examined folk theories of the causes of suffering in the state of Orissa, India, they developed a three-category taxonomy, the "Big Three" of ethics, proposing that these three ethics coexist in almost all cultures in differing degrees of emphasis and mapping the "Big Three" explanations of causality onto a tripartite framework of possible moral codes. The following table summarizes these three ethics[5] (Shweder et al. 1997; Shweder 2003; Jensen 2015).

Ethics	Basis of Morality	Moral Values
Community	People's roles in various social groups such as family, ethnic community, work, religious group, cultural tradition, nation, and the like.	Duty, respect, obedience, honor, loyalty, self-control in social evils, actions consistent with one's social roles, following civil codes of conduct.
Autonomy	People's rights to pursue their needs and desires as they deem appropriate on the ground of fairness, justice, and autonomy as the source of morality.	Independence, liberal values, free will, free action, free expression, freedom of speech and choice, personal wellbeing, self-reliance, and self-sufficiency.
Divinity	Person as a potentially divine, spiritual entity subject to a higher order and one's intrinsic, sacred connection with the ultimate divinity.	Spiritual purity, devotional values, emotional stability, adherence to divine or natural law (often based on religious texts and authorities), obligation to supernatural forces.

These three ethics can be amply found in Hindu texts. For millennia, Hindus have deliberated over ethics and morality through the concept of *dharma*, elaborated in Hindu theological, philosophical, ontological, and epistemological texts, commentaries, epics, folktales, drama, devotional songs, and the like. Many recent studies have illustrated that Hindu ethics can be extracted by inquiring into "the nature of *dharma*, a moral, social, and cosmological "order" that lies at the heart of traditional Hindu thinking about the moral life" (Monius 2005, 330; also see Lipner (1997), Perrett (1998; 2005), Dhand (2002), Prabhu (2005), and Gupta (2006)). Kathryn Ann Johnson (2007), for example, shows that *dharma*-based ethics can be extracted from the *Bhagavad Gītā* using the abovementioned theory of Big Three ethics: 1) aspiring for spiritual well-

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[5] I have changed the order of the first two ethics—of autonomy and of community—in order to go from the external (community) world to the internal (autonomy) and then to the transcendental (divinity).

being, maintaining equanimity in all situations, and attaining everlasting happiness are ethics of autonomy; 2) maintaining social order, developing emotional detachment to be on the side of the righteousness, and participating in the welfare of society are ethics of community; and 3) upholding cosmic order, offering loving devotion to the divinity, and developing faith that whatever happens, happens for the good of all are ethics of divinity.

In the case of *nityapūjā*, it was observed during my ethnographic fieldwork that these three ethics modulate with two correlated factors: 1) the degree to which an ethic is evoked by the informant in association with the attention given to different components in her *nityapūjā*: for example, does the Ethics of Community decline, remain stable, or rise with the practice of doing rosary?; and 2) the specific moral values, reasons, and justifications that the informant highlights within an ethic: for example, which specific moral values within the Ethics of Community are strengthened or weakened by applying sacred marks? Considering these factors, I will now map the ethnographic data onto the Big Three ethics.

Due to the necessarily limited scope of this paper, I will not be able to offer accounts and analyses of the ethnographic data relevant to the first quadrant (Q1). This data primarily includes practitioners who are quantitatively and qualitatively low on both somatic and cognitive practices of *nityapūjā*. In fact, most members understandably fall under this category when they first begin performing *nityapūjā*. This dataset also includes the accounts of some sincere practitioners' intermittent indolent phases during which they perform *nityapūjā* mechanically or disinterestedly as an obligatory routine, a "license to have breakfast." Most such narratives did not allude to any sort of moral or spiritual formation and, hence, cannot be categorized using the Big Three theory. Other narratives that elaborated on the somatic and cognitive components and related moral formation will be placed on the quadrants Q2, Q3, Q4.

The Ethics of Community

The Ethics of Community include moral values that emphasize the person's participation in social groups such as family, work, or even nation, in terms of person's social roles that bind one with others in the tangled relationships of differing obligations. These ethics influence the moral judgment of the degree to which a person *ought* to be involved with, supportive of, and dependent upon the group in promoting the goals, needs, and interests of all members of the group. These ethics are primarily characterized in terms of cordial relationship with others, unity among the group, and personal physical and psychological wellbeing through others' well-being.

In the case of *nityapūjā*, it was observed that the respondents talked about group ethics mostly while narrating bodily components of the *nityapūjā*, especially applying sacred marks, circumambulating, prostrating, and bowing down to one's parents. For example, one frequent response associated with the practice of wearing sacred marks

was that it makes the practitioner easily remembered and potentially revered in social and cultural groups, particularly in a large workplace or ethnic community where people are usually lost in the masses. This reverence or at least recognition not only strengthens the practitioner's self-esteem and self-confidence in dealing with others, but also develops reciprocative respect and concern for others. Jeejna Mandavia, a high school history and social science teacher in Toronto, Canada, expresses:

> When I started applying *cāndalo*, many of my colleagues as well as students asked what it is and the reason for my application. Some of them asked for the sake of asking, not necessarily with genuine interest. I was shy and reserved in fully explaining at first, but later I learnt to patiently explain the purpose behind the practice. Within a few months, I noticed a positive change in some of my less behaved students. That of course boosted my self-confidence, and more importantly, as a teacher it made me take even more interest in those less behaved students, while addressing inappropriate student behavior in a positive manner. (2015).

Not all practitioners started applying sacred marks as soon as they started doing *pūjā*. In fact, quite the opposite. Most did not apply them for many months, years, or, in some cases, even decades. Most devotees initially feel shy in applying these marks, especially the male youth who are supposed to apply a conspicuous *tilak* and *cāndalo*, primarily because it would announce to the presumably modern and secular world that they follow such orthodox religious traditions and practices. However, once they gathered the courage to apply the sacred marks for whatever reason and started wearing them throughout the day, most of them realized within a few months the manifold social benefits this practice entails, which, in turn, reinforced their ethics of community. Many informants, for example, mentioned that since they are now respected by their peers as having high integrity and purity, they also feel more comfortable intermingling with others. This affirmative recognition and reciprocation makes the practitioners seek more association with the group, whether familial, cultural, social, or professional, molding them to be more community-concerned and less self-centered. Similarly, in the case of the practice of *daṇḍavat*, prostration before God and guru, Mohak Shroff, a vice president in a prestigious Silicon Valley company, feels that

> [T]he idea of placing myself at God's feet is very comforting for me. It's a recentering for me. It makes me less egotistical and helps me work comfortably with my peers and subordinates. When I do not do *daṇḍavat* for many days in a row, I can see that ego rises in me and I become difficult to deal with, even at home, for my wife, my daughter… I clearly notice the difference… However, as soon as I resume the practice of doing *daṇḍavat*, my ego is in check and everything is fine again (2015).

Many such accounts demonstrate how somatic components of *pūjā* and the Ethics of Community are mutually influential. The routinized bodily practices seem to strengthen the social bond of the practitioner as a part of a community and her or his role as a member of a group with a position, station, or function that is immediately connected to the self and the other. Such practices could potentially bring forth collective conscience and moral consideration to participate in, be reliant upon and indebted to, and contribute constructively towards integration of a group or a set of diverse groups. Therefore, in the moral-ritual graph (Figure 2), it seems pertinent to place the development of community ethics primarily in Quadrant 4 (Q4), which is high on bodily practices of *nityapūjā*. By this mapping, I do not suggest that merely bodily practices yield such ethics; there is of course some sort of introspection and deliberation involved on or along with such practices to be practically effective. However, the ethnographic narratives suggest that community-based ethical considerations ensue primarily from the somatic practices of *nityapūjā* and not directly from the cognitive ones. This observation brings me to my second mapping of the Ethics of Autonomy.

Figure 2
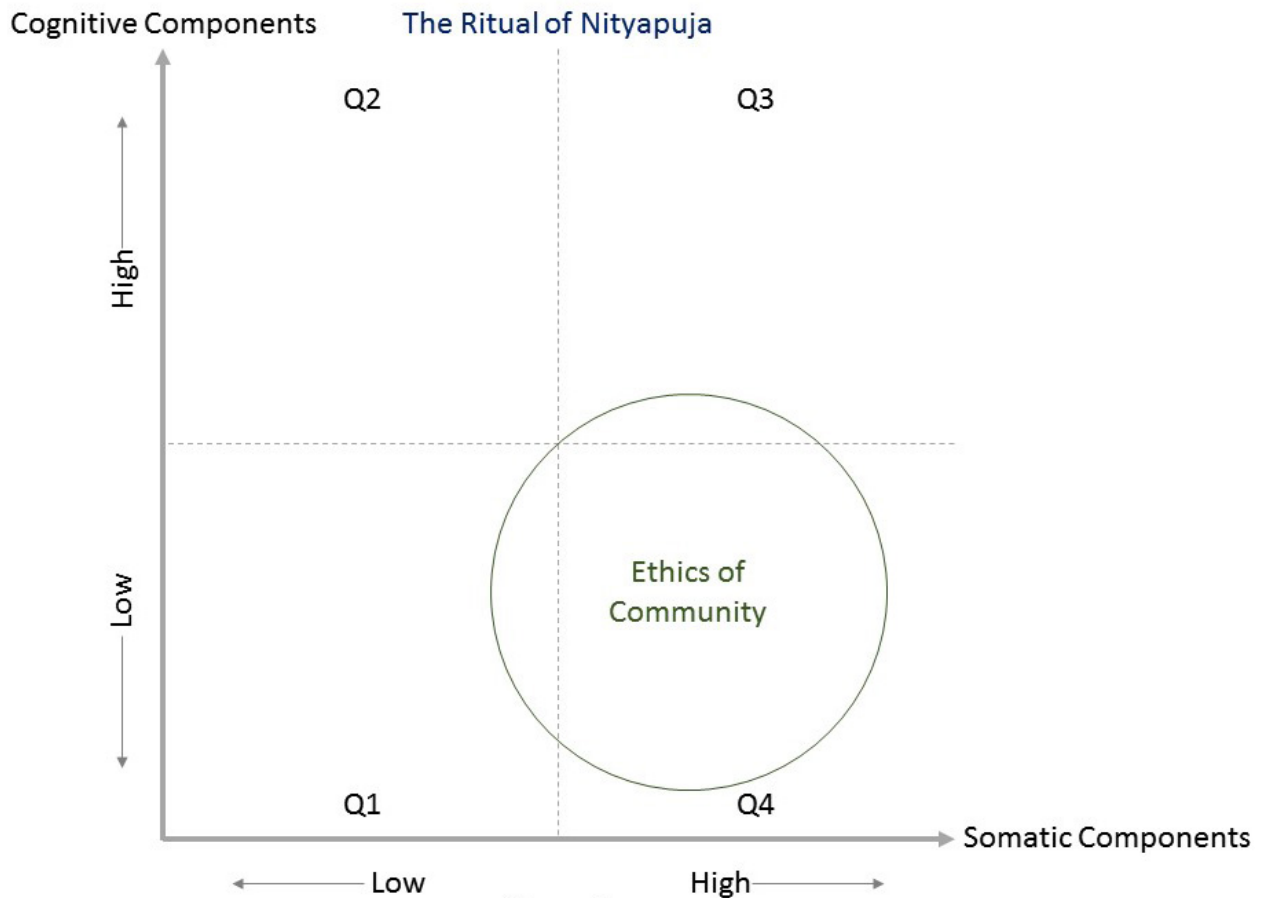
The Ethics of Autonomy

This ethical code identifies an individual as the source of morality, with the underlying idea that people should be allowed to satisfy their needs, wants, and interests as they deem appropriate. It relies on regulative, egalitarian moral concepts such as free action, free expression, human rights, liberty, justice, and fairness, while promoting the exercise of individual will in the pursuit of personal preferences (Shweder et al. 1997, 138). Aiming to protect the discretionary choice of individuals, this group of ethics includes the physical and psychological well-being of the other through autonomy-oriented virtues (Jensen 2015).

My ethnographic data suggests that the Ethics of Autonomy are dominant in those practitioners who spare more time for the introspection- and contemplation-oriented cognitive components such as *ātma-vicāra* (introspection about the true nature of the soul or the self being inherently pure, peaceful, observer, controller, and the like), *paramātma-vicāra* (contemplation on the form and attributes of the divinity, Bhagwan Swaminarayan in this case), and *mānasīpūjā*. While focusing primarily on self-examination and self-cultivation, such spiritual practices create, at the same time, an inclusive space for others even amidst egregiously problematic conduct.

Nicky Patel, for example, could keep herself going against all odds primarily due to the cognitive components of her daily *nityapūjā*. In the early years of their marriage, her husband Upendra had to close down their business due to unforeseen circumstances. When he failed to find a job or start a new business, he turned to alcohol for a temporary respite and soon became totally addicted to it. As he struggled and failed to quit alcohol, he gradually developed over a few years an irritable and irritating personality. Nicky was severely stressed due to not only his nature or the strained relationship with him but also the extended hours she had to work to raise two children and sustain the family. There were times when she thought of filing for divorce or even committing suicide. What gave her both psychological and spiritual strength during these emotional breakdowns was the practice of doing *ātma-vicāra*, in which she tried to see her husband as a pure immortal soul and not a defiled alcoholic mortal. She also received practical and spiritual guidance from her guru Pramukh Swami Maharaj, through both the exchange of letters and the imaginative conversations with him during her *mānasīpūjā*. For almost two decades, she patiently, albeit many a time frustratingly, prayed to "Swamibapa" (Pramukh Swami Maharaj) for her husband's betterment and for stability in her family life. Finally, Upendra was successful in relinquishing his drinking habit, starting a new business, and developing it steadily. Today, the once irritating Upendra is one of the most lovable and respectable members—"Upendra uncle," as he is fondly known—in the San Jose BAPS congregation (N. Patel 2015).

Many respondents like Nicky believe that their attachment to and conversations with their guru are significant sources of the emotional stability and moral strength they need to cope with their everyday troubles. The daily ritual of *nityapūjā* helps them

connect with their guru, mostly through its cognitive component of *mānasīpūjā*. It facilitates their personal conversations, real or imaginative, dialogical or monological, with the guru, without whom, they feel, they would be "clueless," "confused," "depressed," "frustrated with everyone and everything," "dejected in life," or would have even "committed unthinkable and unpardonable acts." Conversations with and prayers to the guru lead these individuals to reassert their confidence both in themselves and others, because the guru reveals and helps them realize their "true form, *ātman*," which is essentially pure, peaceful, and blissful. This recognition of the potentially transcendent nature of the self helps them enhance their consciousness of the presence of divinity not only in themselves but also in others. If one nurtures such consciousness through daily practice and evolve it fully "through the grace of Shriji Maharaj and blessings of Swamibapa," Nicky believes, one can comfortably grapple with the everyday problems and pains by developing judicious perspectives that allow moral, social, and psychological space to others on the ground of the spiritual nature of the self.

Moral reasonings, emotions, and behavior influenced by this type of consciousness of the self give rise to autonomy-oriented virtues such as self-esteem, self-expression, self-sufficiency, equality between individuals, and recognition of the choices and rights of others. Therefore, the Ethics of Autonomy are placed in Quadrant 2 (Q2), where the cognitive components of the *pūjā* are given more emphasis over the somatic components (Figure 2). Although the types of autonomy concepts that *nityapūjā* practitioners employ are likely to vary based on their educational, familial, and cultural backgrounds, the reasons and judgments expressed within this ethic remain relatively stable across different age and profession groups. Their understanding of the self and the other as a pure and potentially divine *atman* seem to be closely interlinked with the Ethics of Autonomy that emphasize liberty, fairness, reciprocity, and care on the basis of individual moral concerns. As one can infer from the stories of most respondents, this understanding is developed and sustained mainly through *nityapūjā*'s cognitive components. Conversely, the time devoted to these introspective components is also proportional to one's inclination for and emphasis on the values related to moral and spiritual autonomy. This correlation also brings the last Ethics of Divinity in play.
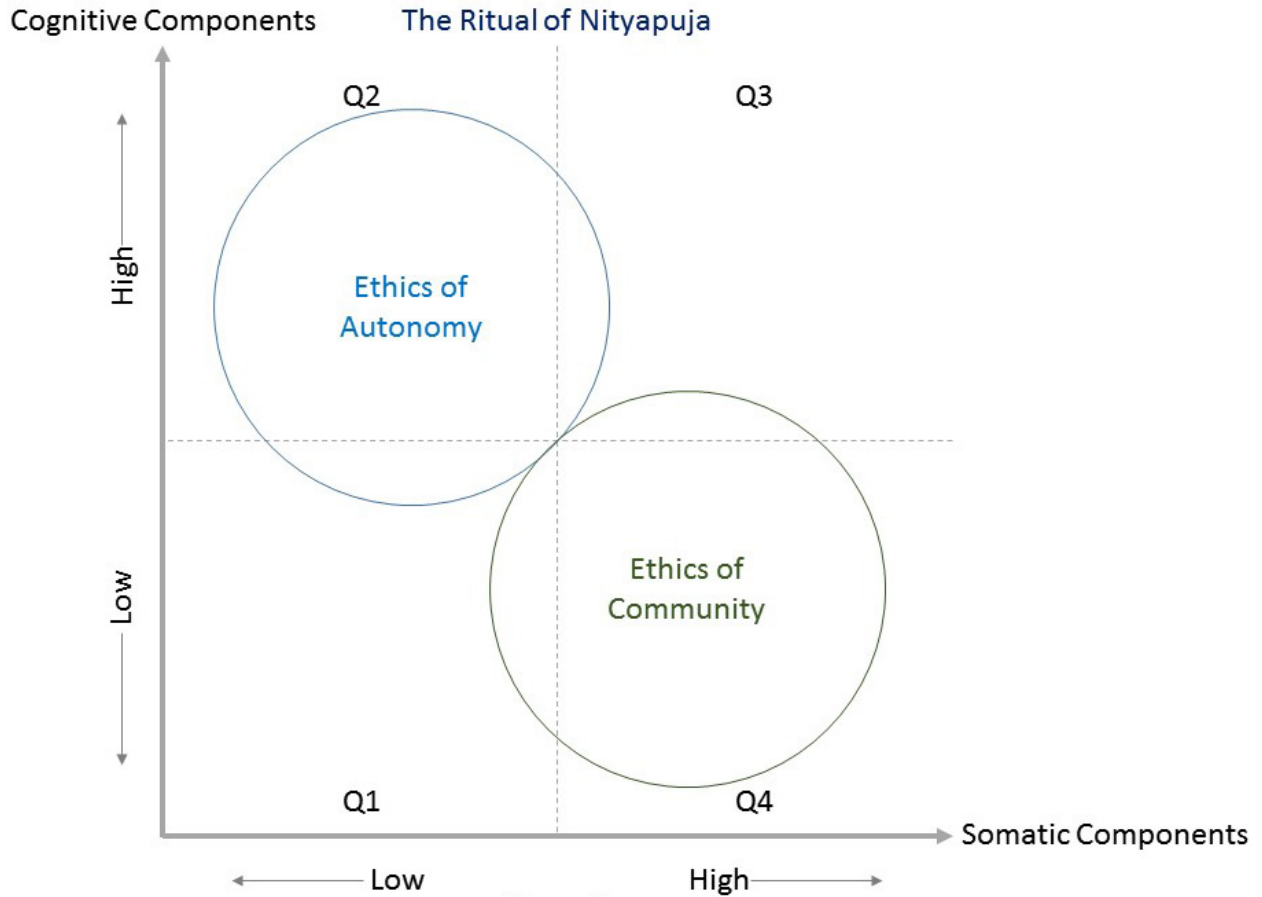
Cognitive Components   The Ritual of Nityapuja

Figure 3

The Ethics of Divinity

The moral conceptions of the Ethics of Divinity pertain to following divine injunctions and teachings prescribed in sacred texts, striving to avoid moral degradation, and coming closer to spiritual purity. This ethic concentrates on divinity-oriented virtues, such as humility, equanimity, and integrity, and characterize persons primarily in spiritual or religious ways. It emphasizes that the ultimate moral goal of the self is to become increasingly connected to the divinity, which is both a means and an end in itself. For the BAPS practitioners who perform the ritual of *nityapūjā* every morning, this supreme divinity or ultimate reality is believed to have manifested on earth two hundred years ago in the form of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, who has remained present on earth through the lineage of living gurus. Therefore, BAPS practitioners' devotional, spiritual, and moral goal is to intimately connect to their guru Pramukh Swami Maharaj and to actively seek his guidance in this-worldly as well as other-worldly matters.

The most prominent feature of *nityapūjā* that emerged from my fieldwork is, as mentioned above, the devotee's personal, seemingly one-way conversation with "Maharaj and Swami," that is, with Bhagwan Swaminarayan and guru Pramukh Swami Maharaj, during their daily *pūjā*. This self-evolved, ubiquitous feature is, paradoxically, not prescribed at all in the ritual manual supplied with the *pūjā*. Nonetheless, it seems to be the most influential quasi-ritualistic act, whether intentional or instinctive, that shapes the moral conceptions keyed to the Ethics of Divinity. Mostly, after performing the cognitive components, especially the *mānasī*, or even while performing the somatic practices, devotees often, advertently or inadvertently, engage themselves in conversation with God and guru regarding their mundane as well as spiritual concerns.

As the above story of Heena reveals, she was able to resolve the deadlock in the legal case by having conversations with her guru Pramukh Swami during daily *pūjā*, doing *pancānga praṇāma*, and thereby potentially developing the qualities of humility and collaborative spirit. Her narration of the multifarious interactions between the ritualistic components of her *pūjā* and her everyday problems and concerns are in a way representative of the accounts narrated by other practitioners, especially those who emphasized on the Ethics of Divinity.

Like most devotees, Heena usually starts her *pūjā* with the cognitive practices of *ātma-vicāra*, *paramātma-vicāra*, and *mānasī*, which includes her "profuse thanks to Maharaj and Swami" for the bountiful blessings they have showered on her. However, as she starts the somatic practices of doing rosary and chanting the *mantra* of "Swaminarayan, Swaminarayan," she involuntarily ruminates over her current day-to-day problems and complicated situations, and slowly her feelings of gratitude and devotion turn into sentiments of grievance and indignation. Her in-laws, for example, who grew up in a small village in India and now live with them in San Jose, do not understand or appreciate her liberal, progressive viewpoints and often frustrate her with their seemingly irrational, orthodox viewpoints. She gets even more frustrated when her well-educated architect husband, who grew up in the modern Western world, also takes his parents' side and tells her to change her attitude, nature, and behavior.

For instance, Heena emphatically expressed that "she has an OCD (obsessive compulsory disorder) about maintaining cleanliness and orderliness in her home and at work" (2015). Her parents-in-law and sister-in-law, however, do not help her in the domestic chores to the extent of her expectations, partly due to their age and physical inability but primarily due to lack of such personal inclination and disposition. These types of frustrations mount throughout the day, either at work or at home, and inevitably become part of Heena's conversation with her guru Pramukh Swami during the *pūjā* ritual. She wryly recounts:

> When I start my *mālā*, I chant Swaminarayan, Swaminarayan softly, lovingly, adoringly... but slowly all these thoughts ride over me and I start complaining to

Swami why he does not do anything about my problems, and as I reach my 40th-50th-60th *mālā*, I am saying SWAMINARAYAN, SWAMINARAYAN (loudly and angrily)... However, I always, always get my answers, one way or other, directly or indirectly, sooner or later. For example, after complaining about my cleanliness OCD and the problem with my in-laws for many months, one day, when I was reading a normative precept in the *Yogi Gītā* that "we usually find faults in others, but never in ourselves, even if we have aplenty within ourselves; therefore, one must first learn to find and work on the faults within and change oneself first before expecting others to change...," I felt as if Swamibapa was telling me that "this is your answer; think over and follow it." Since that day I introspect more and more on myself and work on my anger and OCDs, and I now I feel much better... Now I mostly do not expect my in-laws to change; I accept them as they are... And, surprisingly, as a result, now I see so many wonderful qualities in them that I could never see earlier. I also now lovingly bow down to them every morning and our relationship have significantly improved since I started this practice (Dave 2015).

Here we see a combination of physical and cognitive practices of the *pūjā* working together in a complimentary manner and reinforcing each other. Like Heena, most serious practitioners of *nityapūjā* open their hearts to "Maharaj and Swami" sometime during their *pūjā*, flushing out all their complaints, demands, expectations, frustrations, and positive or negative emotions. They may not get their answer immediately, sometimes for days, months, or even years; however, what really matters for most practitioners like Heena is to have a personal conversation with God, to see him and be seen by him, that is, to have his personal *darśana*, to feel that God and guru are always with them no matter where they are and what they do, and to believe that whatever God does is ultimately for not only their but everyone's advantage.

When such beliefs are religiously reinforced through ritualistic practices, devotees potentially experience a glimpse of divinity that is, using Tanya Luhrmann's term, "hyperreal: realer than real, so real that it is impossible not to understand that you may be fooling yourself, so real that you are left suspended between what is real and what is your imagination" (2012, 238). Conversations with such a hyperreal God creates "magical realism, where the supernatural appears unpredictably and blends almost seamlessly into the natural world, as if the magical were real and the prosaically material were imaginary, and both perspectives are real and true together" (Luhrmann 2012, 238). For *nityapūjā* practitioners, such a "magical realism" materializes when their cognitive practices seamlessly synthesize with the bodily practices, realigning and reinforcing the immanence with transcendence, the material with immaterial. This confluence effects what Teresa Brennan calls "the transmission of affect," through which devotees empty their emotions and develop stability, humility, felicity, and other Ethics of Divinity (2004). Therefore, the Ethics of Divinity is placed in the top-right Quadrant 3 (Q3), where the somatic and cognitive components of *pūjā* complement

each other and work in conjunction to bring about the spirituality- or divinity-oriented ethics.
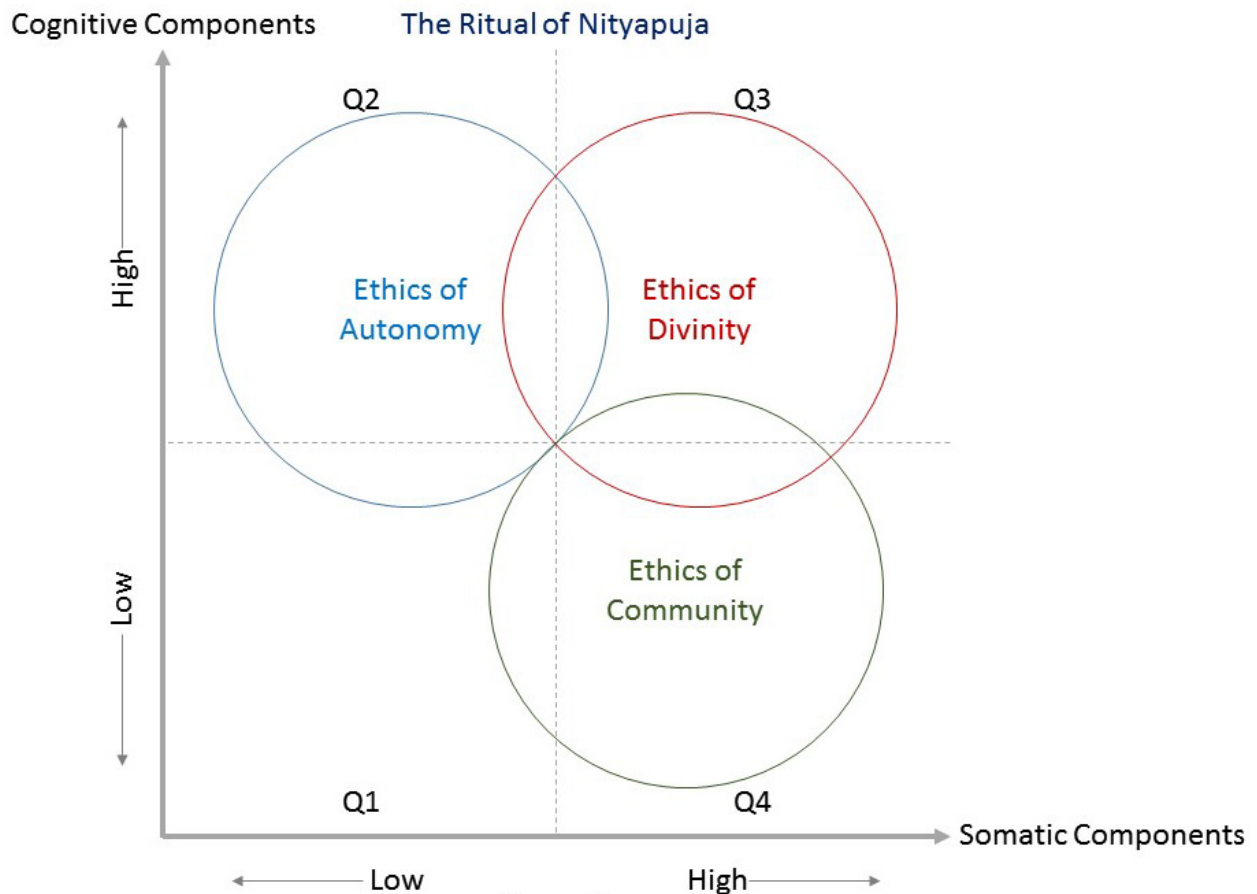

Figure 4

Conclusion

The ritual-moral model that emerges from this examination integrates three sources: 1) the qualitative and quantitative data on how the devotional ritual of *nityapūjā* shapes, and is shaped by, the everyday ethics, actions, and experiences; 2) the theological and ontological beliefs of its practitioners; and 3) the theoretical dimensions of the Big Three of ethics. This model helps us rethink the ancient concept of *dharma* in the modern context of what Joyce Flueckiger calls "Everyday Hinduism," manifested in "the fluidity, flexibility, and creativity of Hindu practices as well as some broad structures and parameters that may cross and be shared across space and time" (2015, 2). In this context, *dharma* can be reimagined as a moral compass that continually realigns with its adherent's somatic and cognitive practices as well as contemporary concerns and conditions. Such a conception of *dharma* is grounded in the relationship between what Marcel Mauss calls the "techniques of the body" (2006) and what Alasdair MacIntyre

defines as virtue: "an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods" (2007, 191). These cultivated virtues reflect excellence in human agency and can be developed by following religious rituals and practices. In this line, the ritual-moral model developed above corresponds with the moral theories that emphasize spiritual virtue ethics of "what I ought to be" rather than deontological duty ethics of "what I ought to do" or consequential ethics of "what maximizes wellbeing" (cf. MacIntyre 2007).

The Big Three theory of morality does not provide an empirical framework to examine interactions among theological doctrines, devotional rituals, and everyday ethics. The ritual-moral model derived above offers necessary elements to analyze the somatic and cognitive components of religious practices in conjunction with the ethical coordinates of the Big Three theory. Together, they provide a prototype that can be developed further to create a testable model to examine the ritual-moral interaction. Such a model could be employed to provide both predictions and explanations for the correlation between the practice of Hindu devotional rituals and the moral formation of the practitioner, especially in the contemporary context of 21st-century Hinduism. It could also shed some light on the mutual influence between the ritual performance and social interaction by analyzing not only how religious practitioners interact in society, but also why they interact the way they do in light of the rituals they practice.

In the case of *nityapūjā*, it seems that the Ethics of Community are primarily associated with the somatic components of the ritual. These ethics emerge early in most practitioners, even if they perform *pūjā* mechanically as a mundane routine. However, as they continue to observe this daily practice, many of them gradually tend to focus more on the cognitive components, which entail the emergence of the Ethics of Autonomy. Then, it seems that most practitioners, over the years, finally develop the Ethics of Divinity as they balance and coalesce both somatic and cognitive components into a coherent whole. Usually, the Ethics of Divinity cultivated over many years then remains a dominant voice across the lifespan and continues to hold some importance, especially in the practitioner's moral and psychological life. Practitioners, of course, differ on how they prioritize various components of their personal *nitypūjā* and thereby the extent to which such practices effect their moral formation and self-cultivation.

The habitual and intentional acts of *nityapūjā* performed every morning make claims upon the practitioners' behavior and mindset for the rest of the day, and thereby influence their broader understanding of human existence, especially the meaning of life. The ontological and theological foundations of such devotional rituals and their repeated performances allow the practitioner to become situated within an existential space of selfhood and otherhood. This cognitive location, in turn, affects moral actions outside the ritual sphere as the result of judgment informed by religious imaginations, attitudes, and experiences undergone in the ritual body. On one hand, such rituals

create possibilities for cultivating moral agency, constructive intersubjectivity, and self-determinacy, and, on the other, they could inhibit the processes of self-realization and social assimilation, because, as Victor Turner (1969) argues, they open liminal spaces by exposing interpersonal, sociocultural, and religious indeterminancy. The ritual-moral model developed above attempts to address this paradox by exploring the ethical dynamism and transformative potential of religious rituals in such a way that permits realization of the "self," integration with the "other," and absorption in the "divine," respectively through the ethics autonomy, community, and divinity.

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