

## Preface

In an attempt to internationalize Nidān, we have embarked on a partnership with **Prof. Pankaj Jain** (at the Department of Anthropology, Department of Philosophy and Religion Studies, University of North Texas, USA.) who has become the guest editor of this volume. We hope to continue this partnership into the future. I wish to thank Prof. Jain for undertaking this editorial responsibility of this volume and introducing a theme: **Hinduism and Materiality**. The articles published in this volume deal with material culture in Hinduism as well as Hindu spirituality. We hope that readers will find these articles illuminating and useful in understanding Hinduism and the various issues related to it. **All the articles have been externally peer reviewed before being published in this volume.** We thank the authors for choosing to publish their research work in Nidān.

### Editor

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**Introducton: 'Hinduism and Materiality'**  
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**Editor**

Religious traditions have consistently demonstrated their intrinsic connection to material culture in expressing themselves. Hinduism has a very rich history of this connection. From its ancient history to the present day it continues to express itself in concrete material phenomena such as ornate temples, music, dance and various visual art forms. Through India Hinduism has expressed itself in unique regional forms using local versions of visible material phenomena. It is these material phenomena that have drawn both casual onlookers as well as intense devotees to these phenomena. Hindu devotion in particular has played a vital role in shaping these objectified phenomena in Hinduism. As such, these visible phenomena have served as important sources in studying and understanding the various aspects of Hinduism in the last few centuries. Keane (2008) emphasized the relationship between materiality of religious activity and religious ideas. In the context of Hinduism, the material form of the divine, that is, *murti* has been emphasized by Doris M Srinivasan (1990) to understand both its cultic and philosophical background. The abstract is fully expressed in the visible form of the deity. Temples, dance, music and other visual manifestations afford unique spaces to locate such manifestations of the divine. What is significant of these material manifestations of religious cultic and mythic ideas is that they implicitly or explicitly become sources for a discourse on religion that evokes both insider as well as outsider responses.

In the present volume of *Nidan*, we present four papers that have dealt with the significance of materiality for understanding Hinduism. The first paper by DeNapoli offers an insight into the significance of song in the Hindu religious expression. She locates her essay by contrasting the Brahmanical worldview that sees the body as an impediment to spirituality, as evidenced in the Sannyasa tradition, with the female Sadhu tradition of Rajasthan which embraces material body and goes beyond gendered dichotomies. She suggests that "[T]heir singing, storytelling, and sacred text practices contextualize their discourses and function as prescient commentaries and interpretations of their official statements that tell us a great deal more about these *sādhus'* experiences of the body in relationship to *sannyās* than their words can usually communicate." By reversing the Brahmanical ideological assumptions, the female Sadhus reject the notion that the woman and her womb is only meant for rebirth and affirm the idea that the female body is equally an abode of the divine. They reject the dichotomy between materiality and spirituality. By linking this ascetic tradition with the Vaishnava devotionalism of Ramanuja in the South, she points out that the various Sadhu traditions in the North have deeply established their ascetic tradition in devotional singing. Through this devotional singing the female Sadhus establish a personal relationship with God. Singing bhajans is a way of

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immersing themselves in God. Their bodies are not theirs but are abodes of the divine, for it is God who created the body and parents only give birth to that body. DeNapoli points out that the female Sadhus place special emphasis on the feelings and emotions through which they experience God. It is here she sees the role of *satsanghs* as crucial as they bring about bodily sensations and sensory experiences. Therefore, she says, “[R]emembering God, to *sādhus*, is feeling God within the heart-mind *and* body.” In other words, such practices of Sadhus establish a special connection between spirituality and materiality.

The second paper explores the idea of materiality through temples. In this essay, Hanna Kim suggests that temples as objects offer us a context for a discourse on materiality. She takes two cases, one a temple that is constructed at Lilburn, Georgia and the other one yet to be constructed at Robinsville, New Jersey and suggests, “[T]he objects, whether present or absent, convey the ways in which their owners, or in the case of BAPS, the temple builders, and their publics respond and how these responses in turn may generate new materializations.” In particular she examines the reaction to the parade of the images of the deities around the Lilburn temple area—from people who protested to people who posted comments on their blogs making assessments of the temple often without much knowledge of the temples. She notes with interest the Protestant Christian framing of the temple. In the case of the Robinsville temple, she examines the debate around the height of the temple and the flag pole. It is interesting to note that the temple dome and the flag pole were quite easily compared with the steeples of a church. Kim comments that “[I]n this framing of architectural accessories, the subtext is that different material expressions of different religions nevertheless point to the universal dimensions of religion, at least in an architectural sense.” Seemingly the BAPS representatives were quite eager to accept the universal notion of religion in an effort ensure that the permission to build the temple is granted. To that extent the BAPS temple is no different from other religious buildings from an architectural point of view. Kim, therefore, notes that even an unbuilt temple can have material consequences for the residents of the town. Thus, both cases that Kim cited offer illustrations of how materiality of religion can evoke a discourse that is on the one hand negative, that is, from the standpoint of the existing residents, and on the other hand a discourse that compels the new comers to accept the Christian framing as normative definition of religion.

Focusing mainly on spirituality, Amanda Huffer offers an insightful discussion on how spirituality gets disconnected from Hinduism in the discourse of many modern Gurus and spokespersons of Hinduism in an effort to make their particular brand of Hinduism universal and to draw both western audiences as well as diasporic Hindus who see themselves as ‘Sanatana Dharma’ followers with no sectarian and denominational boundaries. Analyzing the modern Guru, Amritanandamayi Ma, popularly known as ‘Amma’, Huffer argues that “[T]he

rhetorical history of transnational gurus in the West shows us that the majority of them have chosen to implement generalized universalistic principles usually derived from Advaita Vedanta and couched in the language of spirituality, but dissociated from the greater context of Hinduism in order to garner popular acceptance of their “foreign” religiosity.” She also notes that such attempts do have collateral damage to Hinduism, as often complained and debated by Hindu activists about modern modalities such as Yoga that have become completely disconnected from Hinduism as it spread in they spread in the west. On important consequence of such disassociation from Hinduism is that many of the participants in the new Hindu religious movements distance themselves from the traditional Hindu practices perceiving them as “backwards, ritualistic, hierarchical, and anti-modern sensibilities.” Additionally, she points out that the Hindu youth attempting to establish their Hindu identity are simply “restricted to conservative and orthodox options because the innovative and liberalistic options have been recoded as spirituality.” I believe this is an extremely valuable insight that explains the growing tendency among Hindu youth becoming more and more fundamentalistic about their religion. What is interesting about her analysis is that she highlights the irony of the neo-Vedanta emphasis on universalism. It is the very neo-Vedanta universalism that has stripped Hindu spirituality from its Hindu identity in the manner in which modern transnational Hindu Gurus are presenting Hindu spirituality to make it attractive across ethnic boundaries notwithstanding the fact that their spirituality is founded on neo-Vedantic ideas of universalism as is the case with Amritamayi Ma. However, while they present their brand of spirituality in universal language, Huffer also notes that “many contemporary transnational gurus have created cottage industries by offering services in particular devotional rituals, life-cycle ritual ceremonies, Vedic sacrifices (*yajñas* and *homas*), and so on.” Perhaps, it is in this discrete presentation of Hinduism lies the success of so many modern Hindu Gurus.

Hinduism has successfully established itself in the west through its various forms of material culture. Using Hindu examples, Jonathan Lee examines the relationship between material culture and globalization, secularization and capitalism. Examining this relationship, Lee points out that Hindus have often expressed their disapproval of their religious symbols and icons used in the commercial advertising and marketing. He points out that “[C]orporate and capitalist misappropriation of Hindu icons represents a form of cultural colonization and secularization that is problematic for Hindus and Hindu Americans.” He, therefore, argues that the Hindu activism reveals the interplay between Hindu icons and their religious identities and subjectivity; the appropriation of materiality in a religious tradition can effectively critique the assumptions of secularization thesis and questions the logic of rational capitalism that is devoid of issues of ethnicity and identity. He suggests that material objects of a religion such as icons and so on “matter because it makes known the power of ethnic identity and cultural nationalism in our modern world.”

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The above essays illustrate the close relationship that exists between materiality of religion, in this instance, Hinduism and issues of religious identities, and spirituality. We hope readers will find these articles illuminating the theme Materiality and Religion.

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# Performing Materiality<sup>1</sup> through Song: Hindu Female Renouncers' Embodying Practices in Rajasthan

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## Abstract

In this article attempt is made to emphasize the significance of body in the practices of female *sādhus* in Rajasthan. Contrary to the Brahmanical depictions of ascetic traditions that emphasized the body and materiality in an unappealing light, the female *sādhū* tradition in Rajasthan emphasize the transformative role of body and hence materiality and not as an impediment to liberation. I point out that in the experience of the female *sādhū*s of Rajasthan all polar opposites such as body and mind, emotion and intellect, sacred and profane, transcendence and immanence blend together making the body a house of God.

"The body is a miracle. Because of it we speak, see, smell, and hear. It really is a glorious thing." (Ganga Giri Maharaj, January 17, 2006)

One of the most powerful and provocative tensions in Indian traditions of renunciation (*sannyās*) is the persistent tug-of-war in the relationship between the mortal body (*śarīr*) and the immortal self (*ātman/brahman*). In Brahmanical formulations, *sannyās* means to "throw down," or abandon everything that entraps a person in the phenomenal world (*sansār*). The body is no exception (Olivelle 1975; 1992).<sup>2</sup> Brahmanical renunciant texts mostly portray the body and, by extension, materiality in an unappealing light. In his analysis of the Brahmanical texts on *sannyās*, Patrick Olivelle (1998) argues that its prevailing view of the body demonstrates a "deconstruction" of competing orthodox Brahmanical representations. Unlike the Brahmanical householder ideology that understands the body as a "pure structure" (189), the locus of physical enjoyment and spiritual immortality through sexual procreation, Brahmanical renunciation sees the body "as impure in its very essence, the source..of all pollution" (190), the site of death. Moreover, its rhetoric, according to Olivelle, evokes "a sense of loathing towards the body and a desire to be rid of it...The body is...likened to a rubbish heap or to a putrefying corpse inhabited by worms. People who find delight in their own bodies and those of others are...likened to worms; both revel in putrid matter and excrement" (191). In this model, the renunciant goal of liberation (*mokṣ*) from *sansār* constitutes, in large part, a function of the denial of materiality.

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<sup>1</sup> My use of the term 'materiality' follows the usage of Meredith McGuire's to mean: "Human embodiment, the quality of having and being intimately identified with our bodies...[and] Human material concerns—such as bodily sickness and pain, childbearing and fertility, and the need for adequate food, shelter, and protection from adversity" (McGuire 2088, 102).

<sup>2</sup> In this article, I use the Hindi spelling of words, which usually drops the last vowel 'a,' rather than the Sanskrit spelling (e.g., *sannyās* instead of *sannyāsa*), because it reflects the *sādhū*'s use of Hindi words in their discourses and practices.

Furthermore, in the Brahmanical renunciant framework, women's bodies— indeed, “the female species” in general—are described in the most misogynous terms through use of disturbing images of death and everything else that renunciators (*sādhus*) seek to leave behind in their radical act of renunciation (e.g., sexual activity, marriage, family, householding, the impermanent and illusory world of birth, death, and rebirth). In Olivelle's apt words:

In the fantasy world of the ascetic, the female body must have occupied a prominent place, judging from the frequent allusions to the loathsome nature of a woman's body and to the dangers that women pose. Misogynous attitudes and statements, of course, are not limited to ascetic literature; they are found in most Brāhmanical texts. In ascetic works, however, the tone is harsher and the intent is not just mistrust but total abhorrence of the *female species*. ‘A man becomes intoxicated,’ one ascetic text declares, ‘by seeing a young woman just as much as by drinking liquor. Therefore, a man should avoid from afar a woman, the mere sight of whom is poison’ (Olivelle 1998, 196; italics mine).

The Brahmanical rhetoric illuminates a dominant renunciant discourse on the body as a symbol of/for the negative ideals of destruction, decay and death, one that is similarly featured in other media of representation. As examples, the dramatic visual rhetoric of renunciation, demonstrated by the medieval and/or modern miniature paintings and lithographs and, more recently, the mass-produced photos and books of sky-clad and ash-smeared<sup>3</sup> *sādhus*, images a myriad of manipulated, punctured and decorated bodies. Likewise, the swath of European travel and Christian missionary writings from the British Colonial period contains incredulous Orientalist descriptions and illustrations of renouncer bodies.<sup>4</sup> In this vast discursive milieu, these bodies are overwhelmingly male.<sup>5</sup> For many Westerners, past and present, the ascetic body vividly, if erroneously, connotes the (physically) tortured male body; the disciplined and denied body; the body that must be carefully controlled and ultimately transcended in order to achieve liberation from *sansār*. To that extent, the predominant portrayal of the male *sādhu* who has “thrown down” his body depicts what the Brahmanical literature itself demands of

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<sup>3</sup> The symbol of ash is a common trope in the rhetoric of Brahmanical renunciant traditions. It connotes a *sādhu*'s symbolic death to the world. *Sādhus*, predominantly male *sādhus*, smear their bodies with ash to show their radical detachment from the world. Ash is also important to the bodily performances of *sādhus* because the deity Shiva, the renouncer *par excellence*, is shown in mass-produced images throughout South Asia as covered with ash.

<sup>4</sup> Bernard S. Cohn provides an illuminating discussion of British Colonial representations of Indians and their comportment practices in his monograph, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> The few popular images available of female *sādhus* across Hindu traditions depict them, and their bodies, in much less radical ways than they depict the bodies of male *sādhus*. The mere image of a female *sādhu* evokes the idea of the radical nature of her life because renunciation is traditionally a way of life associated with, and reserved for, high-caste men in the Brahmanical tradition. In the visual rhetoric of female renunciation, female *sādhus* are usually clothed, rather than naked, though they, too, often decorate their bodies with markings characteristic of the particular tradition into which they took renunciation. Moreover, unlike the male *sādhus*, women *sādhus* are not depicted torturing their bodies by subjecting themselves to intense physical feats and disciplines. As an example, see Dolph Hartsuiker, *Sādhus: India's Mystic Holy Men* (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions International), for popular images of male *sādhus*' bodies and the one image of a female *sādhu* (p. 33).

*sādhus*— his “death” to the world, as well as expresses the Brahmanical ideal of transcendence of materiality.

The practices of the female Hindu renouncers with whom I worked in the region of Mewar, a former princely state in southwest Rajasthan, “perform” a very different idea of the body and, more broadly, materiality.<sup>6</sup> By way of context, these female *sādhus* have taken renunciation into one of two different pan-Indian Śaiva traditions of renunciation, namely the Daśanāmi and Nāth orders.<sup>7</sup> While the *sādhus* know the conventional designations for women renouncers in these orders (*sannyāsinī* and *nāth/yoginī*, respectively), they prefer to use the generic term ‘sādhu’ in their self-representations, downplaying sectarian divisions. Moreover, none of the *sādhus* use the gendered feminine term ‘sādhvī’ (literally, “virtuous woman”) in their self-descriptions. To them, this category designates married women who become possessed by the Goddess in a temple dedicated to her and ritually diagnose people’s diseases, healing them through possession by the Goddess. Rather, the *sādhus* linguistically distinguish themselves as a distinct class of holy women from *sādhvīs* by employing either the gendered masculine term ‘sādhu,’ or the feminine words *māī-rām*, *mātā-ram* and/or *mātā-jī* (literally, “holy mother”).<sup>8</sup>

Through their practices the *sādhus* challenge “official” Brahmanical textual assumptions of the body as a repugnant physical fetter to spiritual liberation. This depiction identifies a gendered masculine model of materiality. Although the *sādhus* talk about the body in ways that recall the male model, their “performances” of what I term their “rhetoric of renunciation,” their songs (*bhajans*), stories, and sacred texts, emphasize that the body represents more a transformative vehicle for, and less a debilitating impediment to, experiencing liberation from *sansār*.

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<sup>6</sup> My use of the term ‘performance’ follows the usage established by performance studies-centered and folklore theorists, and linguistic anthropologists. Performance studies scholar Richard Bauman defines the concept in the following way: “A mode of communicative behavior and a type of communicative event. While the term may be employed in an aesthetically neutral sense to designate the actual conduct of communication (as opposed to the potential for communicative action), performance usually suggests an aesthetically marked and heightened mode of communication, framed in a special way and put on display for an audience” (Bauman 1992, 41). Feminist scholars in the disciplines of performance studies and folklore have critiqued Bauman’s analytic model on the basis of its lack of attention to gendered subjectivities. See Patricia Sawin, *Listening for a Life: A Dialogic Ethnography of Bessie Eldreth through Her Songs and Stories* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2004) and, “Performance at the Nexus of Gender, Power, and Desire,” *American Folklore* 115 (455) 28-61 (2002). I speak more about performance as a method in the study of religion and materiality below

<sup>7</sup> The Daśanāmi renunciant tradition was developed and systematized by the Indian scholar-saint Adi Śankaracārya (ca. 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries CE), and consists of ten different branches, only four of which currently initiate women into renunciation. The Nāth Tradition is thought to have been founded by the early medieval sage Goraknāth (ca. 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century CE). Both the Daśanāmi and Nāth traditions represent Śaiva forms of renunciation that patronize the deity Śiva, in contrast to the Vaiṣṇava forms that patronize the deity Viṣṇu. The main Nāth center is located in Junāgaḍ, Gujarat. For the Daśanāmis, there are four major centers located in Badrināth, north India; Dwarka, west India; Pūrī, east India; and Rāmeśwaram, south India. The Daśanāmi tradition is traditionally more orthodox in its ideologies and practices of renunciation than the Nāth tradition, which incorporates frameworks from Hindu and Buddhist Tantra, medieval *bhakti sant* movements, and vernacular traditions.

<sup>8</sup> In light of the *sādhus*’ understandings between ‘sādhu’ and ‘sādhvī,’ and the fact that they themselves do not use ‘sādhvī,’ I refer to female renouncers as *sādhus* in my work.

It is important, therefore, for scholars of religion to distinguish between *sādhus'* discursive and expressive (i.e., aesthetically heightened forms of speaking) practices in renunciant representations of materiality. In its many manifestations, performance offers the *sādhus* a powerful cultural resource and strategy to say what they might not (or cannot) say directly. In the words of historian James Scott, "Oral traditions, due simply to their means of transmission, offer a kind of seclusion, control, and even anonymity that makes them ideal vehicles for cultural resistance" (1990, 160, cited in Narayan 1995, 25). Similarly, as folklorist Roger Abrahams points out, performance serves as "an implement for argument, a tool for persuasion" (1968, 146, cited in Narayan 1995, 258). Hence, it behooves scholars to pay particular attention to what renouncers *do* with their words, and not just to what they say with them; to inquire into the ways in which performance itself constitutes an important interpretive context in which renouncers creatively construct and enact their ideas of what the body means to them, and its role in renunciant piety (Bell 1997; 1998; Bauman 1977; 1992; Schieffelin 1985).<sup>9</sup>

As I have observed in my own field work, the *sādhus* often say in their public discourses that "the body is false [*jhūpā*]," or that it "lacks worth [*kīmatī*]," or that it "has no power [*śaktī*]." But this is precisely what *sādhus* are expected to say, especially female *sādhus*. Dominant patriarchal constructions associate women with the so-called feminine realm of materiality, including in this arena the emotions and sexuality. Societal expectations, too, then, shape, and are shaped by, not only what *sādhus* say, but also how they say what they say to their audience, in their efforts to maintain continuity with received tradition, as well as move beyond its familiar threshold.<sup>10</sup> As individuals who have left behind the world, *sādhus*, as the Brahmanical rhetoric readily underscores, are ideally detached from both worldly and bodily concerns. In my experience, no *sadhu* publicly glorifies the body without also risking the loss of her reputation as "authentic."<sup>11</sup> And yet, the *sādhus'* performances of their rhetoric articulate a counterpoint view to their official discursive statements on the body. Their singing, storytelling, and sacred text practices contextualize their discourses and function as prescient commentaries and interpretations of their official statements that tell us a great deal more about these *sādhus'* experiences of the body in relationship to *sannyās* than their words can usually communicate.

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<sup>9</sup> Meena Khandelwal similarly concurs in her discussion of studies of Hindu women's lives that focus on their discursive statements rather than their practices. See, Khandelwal, *Women in Ochre Robes: Gendering Hindu Renunciation* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004), p. 200.

<sup>10</sup> My statement about the *sadhus'* relationship to (Brahmanical) traditions of renunciation is informed by Karen Pechilis' discussion of Hindu female gurus who "self-consciously associate themselves with received tradition" and, at the same time, "are also innovative within that context by their distinctive contributions to tradition and by distinguishing themselves from each other." See Karen Pechilis, *The Graceful Guru: Hindu Female Gurus in India and the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 6-7.

<sup>11</sup> Meena Khandelwal and Sondra Hausner speak about the ways popular Indian social perceptions about renouncers as detached from the world influence female renouncers' self-representations, and that *sādhus*, regardless of their gender, who speak about their lives may risk perceptions of their authenticity, since renouncers are not, ideally speaking, supposed to talk about the lives that they renounced when they became *sādhus*. See Khandelwal and Hausner's discussion in "Introduction: Women on their Own," in *Women's Renunciation in South Asia*, edited by Meena Khandelwal, Sondra Hausner, and Ann Gold (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 1-36,

Thus, in light of analysis of my data, which I collected during two years of field research with twenty-four female *sādhus* in Mewar,<sup>12</sup> I make three specific arguments that complicate dominant assumptions about the seemingly mutually exclusive relationship between renunciation and materiality. First, I argue that the *sādhus'* practices constitute renunciant performances of materiality through which they imagine and express an alternative paradigm of the body to that illustrated by the Brahmanical model. Unlike the Sanskrit example, the *sādhus'* model sees the body in a positive, instead of negative, light; as dynamic and fluid, rather than static and dangerous. Also, the body is perceived in interpersonal terms as somatic collaborator,<sup>13</sup> and not as a physical competitor, on the *sādhus'* journey to liberation. Their model further suggests the ideal of bodily engagement in contrast to the Brahmanical value of bodily transcendence.

Importantly, absent from the *sādhus'* practices are the misogynous perceptions of 'the female' and 'the female body' as always already synonymous with sexuality and *sansār*. 'Woman' and, relatedly, her womb hardly signify the worldly gateways to hell and rebirth. Rather, the popular cultural association of woman with materiality enables the *sādhus* to take advantage of this idea by emphasizing the female body as equally illustrative of the abode of the divine. As Tulsi Giri, another *sādhu* with whom I worked, explicates: "there are only two societies [i.e., men and women]. God creates both and gives them life. God exists everywhere, in me, in you, in everyone." The *sādhus'* positive valuations of the (female) body are related to their own experiences as mothers. Before taking their renunciant vows, many of the *sādhus* had been mothers and wives, though, as the *sādhus* stress, they renounced only when their domestic obligations to their families had been fulfilled.<sup>14</sup> Hence, the *sādhus'* social-biological experiences of motherhood appear to play a significant role in their individual conceptualizations of materiality as beneficial to their renunciation.<sup>15</sup> My data confirm the analyses of Meena Khandelwal (2004), who discovered a similar pattern in the lives of the *sādhus* she worked with in the pilgrimage towns of Haridwar and Rishikesh in north India. On the basis of her research, Khandelwal argues that "maternal values are viewed by these women not only as entirely consistent with the goals of renunciation but as actually facilitating their fulfillment" (189).

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<sup>12</sup> This number represents a population sample of Hindu female *sādhus* in Mewar for the time in which I conducted field research.

<sup>13</sup> The terms 'somatic collaborator' and 'physical competitor' are mine. As I will show, though, the *sādhus'* performances imply these ideas about the body's role in the attainment of religious liberation.

<sup>14</sup> Many of the female *sādhus* with whom I worked were adamant that I understand that their renunciation happened only when they had fulfilled their householding obligations. The majority of these women, therefore, had been widows by the time the "feeling" to renounce came upon them. These women told me that *sādhus*, regardless of their gender, should not leave the world and pursue their own liberation until and unless they have completed all of their householding requirements (of course, this idea only applies to *sādhus* who had been married). In making these statements, the *sādhus* sought to construct themselves within an orthodox schematic of life stage, legitimating their radical life options on the basis that they had completed the householding life stage.

<sup>15</sup> Carolyn Walker Bynum's analysis of her research on medieval Christian women saints' religious experiences as continuous with their socio-biological ones, has aided my own conceptualization of the *sādhus'* experiences. See Bynum, "Women's Stories, Women's Symbols: A Critique of Victor Turner's Theory of Liminality," in her book, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1996), pp. 27-52.

My second claim involves the idea that the Rajasthani *sādhus* value the body because they locate themselves and their practices in an entirely different tradition of renunciation than that of Brahmanical *sannyās*. In their performances, the *sādhus* neither reproduce Brahmanical *sannyās*, nor constitute a gendered version of it. Rather, as I argue, they refashion dominant Brahmanical ideologies through use of multiple devotional (*bhakti*) frameworks, particularly those popularized by the medieval poet-saint (*sant*) traditions in north India, in the construction of a vernacular (i.e., locally practiced) expression of renunciation that I characterize as “devotional asceticism.” Because the *sādhus*’ model of materiality is rooted in their practice of devotional asceticism, it represents a distinct and equally valid understanding to the view depicted by the Sanskritic model. By drawing on the *bhakti* paradigms of spirituality and materiality expressed in the vernacular-language rhetoric of the *bhakti* poet-saints, which generally conceive the boundaries between these two categories as permeable, the *sādhus* legitimate their unusual perspectives on the body. I find it necessary to distinguish between the *sādhus*’ asceticism and Brahmanical *sannyās* for several reasons. The scholarship often assumes the dominant Brahmanical model as the ideal against which lived forms of the phenomenon are grafted and, as such, seen as variations of the generalized Sanskritic model (but see Lamb 2002). Likewise, in the much of the scholarly discourse on the subject, *sannyās* is equivalent to the orthodox tradition of Brahmanical renunciation. To see, however, Brahmanical *sannyās* as a type of renunciation both in theory and in practice unsettles its privileged position in the scholarship.

The third claim I make is that because the Rajasthani *sādhus* understand the body as a valuable site for spiritual transformation, their practices confound the analytic binaries of spirituality and materiality in religious studies scholarship. As I will show, to these *sādhus*, their religious experiences are directly connected to their physical emotions and feelings. They view their practices as a conduit for bringing about the emotional “remembering” of God that is essential to their transformative experiences of divine communion.<sup>16</sup> Scholars of Hindu traditions frequently take for granted that devotional practices like singing *bhajans*, for instance, are *de facto* religious, and do not consider the underlying somatic aspects of this and other kinds of popular performance. Thus, using the insights of recent scholarship on religion and materiality (McGuire 2008; Orsi 2005; Bell 1998; Coakley 1997), I contend that, in the *sādhus*’ asceticism, their singing—the specific practice analyzed in this study—story and sacred text performances identify purposeful embodying practices. What makes the *sādhus*’ *bhajan* singing an embodying act is something I discuss in detail below. Significantly, the *sādhus*’ singing practices constitute a context for (re)embodying both in their bodies and their minds what renunciation means to them in a new way. Just as important, by singing *bhajans*, the *sādhus* link, in the words of sociologist Meredith McGuire (2008), their “materiality as humans” with their spirituality as *sādhus* (115).

### **The Context of *Sant Bhakti* in the Devotional Asceticism of Rajasthani *Sādhus***

Before we explore the *sādhus*’ religious worldviews about the body, it is important to put their *bhakti* orientation into historical perspective with respect to the larger phenomenon of

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<sup>16</sup> The term ‘remembering [*smaran karnā*]’ is the *sādhus*’ term. As I will show, their usage parallels the usage featured in recent theoretical discussions in religious studies scholarship on religion and materiality in which ‘remembering’ signifies embodying and embodied religious experience. See, for instance, Meredith McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 97-158.

Hindu renunciation. While *bhakti* is largely absent in Śaiva renunciation (and, broadly speaking, in the dominant Brahmanical model), its use as a guiding conceptual framework is found in other forms of *sannyās*. Śaiva *sannyās* represents only one type of renunciation in South Asia. Hindu renunciation, in particular, typically consists of two main branches: Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava.<sup>17</sup> Hence, in addition to Śaiva-based traditions like the Daśanāmi, Nāth, and Lingayat,<sup>18</sup> there are also numerous Vaiṣṇava traditions of renunciation, of which the largest group are the Ramanandis (Lamb 2003; Hartsuiker 1993; Bedi 1991; Gross 1991).<sup>19</sup> Vaiṣṇava *sādhus* are known as *vairāgis*, “the dispassionate ones.” And, unlike Śaiva forms of *sannyās*, Vaiṣṇava *sannyās*, from its inception as an organized sectarian institution, has been deeply influenced by *bhakti* traditions (Khandelwal 2004, 206 ft. note 8; Gross 1991, 57-61). The history of late classical and medieval Vaiṣṇava *sannyās* is marked by significant interaction with *bhakti* traditions and incorporation of *bhakti* beliefs into its overall conceptual structure and practice.

The historical evidence suggests that the *bhakti* philosopher Ramanuja (ca. 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century CE), founder of the orthodox Vaiṣṇava tradition known as the Śrīvaiṣṇavas or Śrī *sampradāya*, was one of the first thinkers to shape what gradually became Vaiṣṇava *sannyās* (Khandelwal 2004, 27-28; Gross 1991, 57). In contrast to Śankara who taught a philosophy of absolute monism, or unqualified non-dualism (Advaita Vedanta), Ramanuja developed the ideological system of qualified dualism (Viśiṣṭadvaita Vedanta), which posits a distinction between deity and devotee. Ramanuja’s ideological position enabled him to incorporate a devotional outlook into the framework of his religious teachings in which he emphasized devotion rather than knowledge as the means of liberation. Because deity and devotee were seen as ultimately separate, Ramanuja envisioned liberation as union with, as opposed to the Advaita position of dissolution into, God.<sup>20</sup> The *bhakti* orientation of early Vaiṣṇava *sannyās* on account of Ramanuja was rooted in the *bhakti* movements that, beginning in south India with the Tamil Āḷvars, swept through and transformed the face of the Indian subcontinent between the sixth and seventeenth centuries of the Common Era (Martin 2000; Schomer 1987; Ramanujan 1999).

Following Ramanuja in influencing the devotional aspect of Vaiṣṇava renunciation were Nimbarka (ca. 12<sup>th</sup> century CE), Madhva (ca. 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century CE), Visnuswami (ca. 13<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century CE), and the sixteenth century Bengali ecstatic, Caitanya (Gross 1991, 58; McDaniel

<sup>17</sup> Khandelwal notes: “Two of the most general sectarian categories divide Hindus into followers of either Lord Shiva or Lord Vishnu” (Khandelwal 2004, 27).

<sup>18</sup> As Gross points out, the Lingayats are a renunciant sect that is almost exclusively located in the state of Mysore in South India (Gross 1991, 56). One of the most famous figures in the history of Lingayat devotionalism is the female saint Mahadeviyakka, who composed poems of love to Śiva, whom she considered to be her “real” husband, and who wandered about naked and covered in ashes. See Ramanujan 1999; Ramaswamy 1997; and Kinsley 1981.

<sup>19</sup> According to Gross, the Ramanandis are not only the largest Vaiṣṇava sect, but also the largest ascetic population in India (Gross 1991, 59). The Ramanandis are not, however, a monolithic religious order. As Gross describes, the order “comprises a widespread and diffuse network of subsections” (61).

<sup>20</sup> Gross explains: “Ramanuja...reacted against Śankara’s teachings and developed an opposing theology based on Bhakti and...devotion to a personal god...He stressed the worship of Viṣṇu and his consort Lakṣmī and incorporated the earlier mystical Vaiṣṇavaite devotional hymns of the Tamil Āḷvars” (Gross 1991, 57).

1989, 27-85; see also Dimock 1966).<sup>21</sup> Like Ramanuja, all of these thinkers founded their own traditions and preached devotion as a liberating path to the divine.<sup>22</sup> Nimbarka founded the Nimbarka or Sanaka *sampradāya*, which promoted devotion to the forms of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā. Madhva, who was originally a Daśanāmi sadhu but left the order, propagated the teachings of theistic dualism (*dvaita*) and started the Brahma *sampradāya*, emphasizing devotion to Lakṣmi-Narāyan; Visnuswami began the Rudra *sampradāya*; and Caitanya is credited with founding Gaudiya *sampradāya*, which teaches ecstatic devotion to Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā (Gross 1991, 58).<sup>23</sup>

Within this broad framework of Vaiṣṇava devotional traditions is the Ramanandi renunciant order, which traces its origin to the teachings of Ramananda (Gross 1991, 59-61; Fuller 1992, 164; Martin 2000, 187).<sup>24</sup> Ramananda is thought to have been born in the city of Prayag in northern India, and to have lived between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries CE (Gross 1991, 59). He is considered to be the first *bhakti* poet-saint of the Hindi-speaking regions of north India (Fuller 1992, 164; Martin 2000). Ramananda is further believed to have been initiated as a renunciant into Ramanuja's Śrī *sampradāya*. However, his uncompromising liberal views on caste and gender equality became a source of contention to the extent that Ramananda eventually formed his own sub-sect of Ramanandis within the Śrī *sampradāya* (Gross 1991, 58).

Apart from his acceptance of all castes and women into the order, Ramananda preached devotion to God in the forms of Ram and Sita as the way to divine realization. Informing Ramananda's views on caste, gender, and *bhakti* as the ultimate path to the Lord was the idea that deity and devotee are essentially the same.<sup>25</sup> Ramananda's egalitarian teachings and earnest *bhakti*-orientation earned him recognition in Nabhaji's *Bhakta Māla* ("Garland of Devotees"), a collection of semi-historical accounts of devotional saints (Gross 1991, 60; Martin 2003; 2000; Lorenzen 1996; Hawley and Juergensmeyer 1988). According to this hagiographical source, Ramananda is thought to have initiated twelve disciples from different castes. Included among his disciples are the legendary Kabir (ca. fifteenth century CE), a weaver from the *juhala* caste, and the *camar* (an untouchable leatherworker whose members dispose of the carcasses of dead animals), Raidas (Gross 1991, 60; Martin 2000, 183).<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> As cited in Gross (1991, 59), Ghurye (1953) claims that there are few renunciants in the Śrī *sampradāya* of Ramanuja, and that the earliest *vairāgīs* were associated with the Nimbarka *sampradāya*.

<sup>22</sup> Although the original founders of the Vaiṣṇava orders were celibate ascetics, not everyone who joined the sect were celibate. It is important to point out that Ramanuja, Nimbarka, Madhva, and Visnuswami did not found ascetic orders per se, but rather Vaiṣṇava sectarian orders. Most of these orders' constituency consisted of householders, and the Śrī *sampradāya* today consists almost exclusively of householders. According to Gross, not until the early medieval period (ca. 13<sup>th</sup> -14<sup>th</sup> centuries) did large numbers of ascetics join the Vaiṣṇava orders (Gross 1991, 58).

<sup>23</sup> Followers of Gaudiya Vaiṣṇava align themselves with Madhva's Brahma *sampradāya* (Gross 1991, 58).

<sup>24</sup> The Ramanandis, like the other Vaiṣṇava traditions, consists of both ascetics and householders. However, unlike the four main Vaiṣṇava traditions (i.e., Sri, Sanaka, Brahma, and Rudra *sampradāyas*), ascetics outnumber householders in the Ramanandi order (cf. van der Veer 1988; R. Lamb 2003).

<sup>25</sup> Gross explains: "...one of the central tenets of the Rāmānandīs is that there is no difference between Bhāgwān [*sīc*] and bhakta, between god and devotee; and, therefore, the distinctions between castes are meaningless" (1991, 60).

<sup>26</sup> The accuracy of these claims has been challenged by several scholars (see, for instance, Martin 2000; Lorenzen 1996; Schomer and McLeod 1987; Hess 1982, 1987). The argument that Kabir and Raidas received initiation from Ramananda is considered to be a strategy for establishing their legitimacy

Whether or not they became disciples of Ramananda, both Kabir and Raidas were independently pivotal *bhakti* figures in the catalyzation and development of the medieval *bhakti sant* movement that blossomed throughout India.

The *sant* movement, consisting of renowned *bhakti* poet-saints (*sants*), who composed poems of fervent love and devotion to God in the regional, vernacular languages (Schomer 1987, 1; Martin 2000, 183), like the earlier *bhakti* traditions from the Tamil and Kannada-speaking areas, promoted “the cultivation of a loving relationship between the individual and a personally conceived supreme god” (Schomer 1987, 1).<sup>27</sup> All individuals, regardless of caste, class, gender, and education, were seen as spiritual equals in the eyes of God (Martin 2000, 184). Everyone, not just the educated Brahmin priests who conducted rituals in the temple, had the right to worship God and to experience divine truth through means of loving devotion to the divine.<sup>28</sup>

As a generic term, *sant* means ‘one who knows the truth’ or ‘one who has experienced the Ultimate Reality’ (Schomer 1987, 2; Hawley and Juergensmeyer 1988). Historically, however, the term has been used to refer to the medieval *bhakti* saints associated with two different devotional groups, namely the southern and northern *sants*. The southern *sants* are characterized as non-sectarian (and non-orthodox) Vaiṣṇavas who flourished between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries in Maharashtra and who preached *prem-bhakti* (love for God) in the form of Vittala at Pandharpur (Schomer 1987, 3; Vaudeville 1987, 29-31). The Marathi-speaking *sants* are also collectively known as the Varkāri (the pilgrims’ order), because devotees make an annual pilgrimage to Pandharpur (Schomer, 4). Some of the well-known members of this group are Jnaneshwar, who is credited as the founder of the southern *sant* group, Namdev (1270-1350), Eknath (1548-1600), Tukaram (1598-1649), and his female disciple Bahina Bai (1628-1700) (Schomer 1987, 4; Vaudeville 1987, 29; Feldhaus 1985, 1981; Abbot 1985 [1929]).

The northern *sant* movement, which flourished from the fifteenth century onward, stretches from the regions of the Punjab to Rajasthan. Individual *sants* associated with this group taught devotion to a nameless, formless, and genderless God (*bhagvān*), and their teachings are generally grouped in the scholarly literature under the category of *nirgun bhakti* (devotion to God without qualities), though the distinction between *nirgun* and *sagun* (God with qualities) *bhakti* is not always recognized (or emphasized) by the *sants* themselves (Schomer

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amongst devotional traditions, rather than historical fact (see also Schomer 1987, 5). Schomer argues: “What is likely is that later tradition invented the connection with Ramanand in order to give them [i.e., Kabir, Raidas, etc.] Brahmanical respectability by affiliating them with the orthodox mainstream of the *bhakti* movement; because of [Ramananda’s] liberal views, he was at least a plausible guru for these largely low-caste men and women.” (Schomer 1987, 5).

<sup>27</sup> A number of scholars have cautioned that the *bhakti* movement is not a monolithic tradition (Burchett 2009; Hawley 2007; Shukla-Bhatt 2007; Ramanujan 1999; Schomer 1987). As Karine Schomer explains, “it is equally if not more important to conceive of [the *bhakti* movement] as a cluster of individual *bhakti* groups, each with its particular emphases. These groups are strongly regional, moreover, so that they are distinguished not only by their doctrinal content but by their separate histories” (Schomer 1987, 2).

<sup>28</sup> Karine Schomer writes, “Salvation, once considered unattainable except by men of the three upper castes, came to be seen as the prerogative of all, and spiritual leadership shifted from the Brahmin priest knowledgeable about ritual and Sanskrit scriptures to the [humble] figure of the popular poet-saint...” (Schomer 1987, 1).

1987, 61-90; Vaudeville 1987, 26; see also Hawley 1995; Lorenzen 1995). Although the notion of devotion to a nameless and formless Absolute may seem like a logical contradiction, it was not perceived as such by the northern *sants*. An understanding of God as *nirgun* does not imply the abolition of *bhakti* (but see Stall 1987), which presumes a distinction between deity and devotee, but rather, as Vaudeville points out, a recognition of God as beyond qualities. Vaudeville explains:

For the Sants...nirguṇa is a somewhat magic word. They would talk of the ultimate object of their own bhakti as nirguṇa, but for them, nirguṇa should not be interpreted as 'that which is deprived of qualities' but rather as 'that which is beyond the three guṇas' (inherent to material nature, prakṛti) and even beyond the traditional distinction between the nirguṇa and saguṇa aspects of the Godhead (Vaudeville 1987, 28).

Apart from Kabir and Raidas, the *sants* belonging to the northern group are Guru Nanak (1469-1539) who founded the Sikh religious tradition, and Dadu Dayal of Rajasthan (1544-1603). Of these figures, scholars frequently characterize Kabir, Nanak, and Dadu Dayal as the major players behind the development of the (northern) *sant* movement (Schomer 1987, 6; Lorenzen 1996). *Sants* like Kabir, Raidas, and Dadu are believed to have founded their own traditions (e.g., the Kabir and Raidas *panthis*, and the Dadu *panthis*, respectively). Whether they are from the northern or southern groups, as a movement the *sants* preached through song and story not only the hypocrisy of caste (and Brahmanical) hegemony (but see Burchett 2009), but also the power of devotion and, more specifically, the glory of the divine name. They gathered in fellowship for devotional singing (*satsang*)—which some scholars maintain was originally a form of Vaiṣṇava *bhakti*—in order to remember and experience God. *Sant satsang* and devotionalism, more broadly, have influenced many of the practices of popular Hinduism, and *sant* poetry and teachings have become embedded features of present-day Indian religious and political discourse (Schomer 1987; Mukta 1997; Hawley 2005). Not only does *sant* rhetoric constitute a principal component of the rhetoric of renunciation of most of the *sādhus* I worked with, but *sant bhakti* attitudes and ideals also underlie these *sādhus'* religious worldviews.

### **“Live in the House but Don't Let it Live in you”: Performing Renouncer Ideas of Materiality**

The most prolific theme featured in the *sādhus'* performances involves the notion that renunciant practice (i.e., *bhajan* singing) expresses an intense somatic experience. The *sādhus* construct this association by drawing on various bodily metaphors in their descriptions of spiritual practice. The usual symbols have to do with those of the house, medicine, and food. The symbol of the house, for example, has multiple somatic valences in the *sādhus'* practices. It can represent the body, the castes of individuals, or the two sexes of female and male. However they use this polyvalent symbol to mean, the house usually carries a positive value to the *sādhus*. One of the Ganga Giri's didactic stories on the house as a trope for the body demonstrates this point.

Wherever you look, God (*sāin*) is there, in every place. But you cannot see God; God is not seen. Everything you do is because of God. You cannot move your fingers [moves her own fingers]. Only God moves them. God moves everything. God makes us speak. God makes us see. God makes us eat. God makes us sleep and awakens us. God does everything. This body is like a stone (*patthar*). When God leaves the body [i.e., when it

dies], it becomes like a stone. The body is like a stone. Whether you burn it, or whether you throw it away, it has no worth. It is not worth even a single rupee. It speaks and thinks it has worth. But when it dies, it will be thrown into a pit...Put your concentration (*dhyān*) in God (*bhagvān*). Make the hobby of singing *bhajans*, and your concentration will become immersed in God. You will receive knowledge...Concentration is an important thing; it is like a training. Like, you have to train before you get a job. You train, and then you get the job. Like a teacher has to train before [s/he] gets the job. Concentration is like a training of the heart/mind (*jī*). Eat, drink, sleep, speak, meet each other, serve each other, do everything. Just keep your concentration on God. Look, it is not a sin (*pāp*) to live in the house. But don't let the house live in you. Don't keep the house in your mind (*man*). This [house] is not ours. Don't keep the house in your mind. It is bad to keep the house in the mind.

Ganga Giri narrated this story on a Monday morning in January to five Hindu householders consisting of three women and two men from various castes and classes. On any given day one finds Ganga Giri sharing her teachings with people from all walks of life—Hindu and non-Hindu (i.e., Jain), householders and *sādhus*, young and old, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, high and low-castes, that is, individuals whose everyday life experiences shape, are shaped by, the specificities of their bodies. Those who come to Ganga Giri, regardless of their social and religious backgrounds, are attached to the idea of the necessity of their bodies. Their everyday worlds require them to live in the body, rather than to escape it. Ganga Giri, poignantly aware of this fact, helps her listeners to know God with their bodies and their minds. On this day, the women at Ganga Giri's hermitage were from a milking (*theḷī*) community, appeared to be post-menopausal and working class. They came from making the *darśan* of the gods at the nearby Mahakaleshwar (Śiva) temple, one of the wealthiest religious institutions in Udaipur, and stopped at Ganga Giri's place for her *darśan* as well. These women visited Ganga Giri mostly on Mondays, when they sought respite from their usual householding activities by making *vrats* (fasts) for their own spiritual enlightenment and spending time with holy people. Nem Singh, an elderly Rajput man who earned his living by farming plots of his own land, took a government bus daily from his village to Ganga Giri's hermitage in order to make sure she had fresh pots of water for her meals and rituals. From Ganga Giri's place, Nem Singh walked at least a kilometer to the closest well and brought her fresh water, an activity Ganga Giri could no longer do because of her advanced age of ninety years (2005). Nem Singh considered his efforts as *sevā* (service) to Ganga Giri. The other man, Sohan Lal, a seventy-year old retiree from the merchant (*baniyā*) community who operated a guest house in Udaipur city, (his sons took over the family business after Sohan Lal retired), spent most of his days, in his words, in "*satsang*" (devotional fellowship) with Ganga Giri. He described her teachings as the potent *brahma-jñān* (salvific knowledge of God) that nurtured his soul (*ātmā*) and helped him to find peace-of-mind.<sup>29</sup>

Ganga Giri's teaching resembles the many mystical reflections about the relationship between God and the body voiced in the *Upaniṣads*, a corpus of Vedic texts. Note the parallels between Ganga Giri's discourse on the body and its representation in the *Kena Upaniṣad*:

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<sup>29</sup> Because of the proximity between Sohan Lal's home and my own residence, I often rode with him to Ganga Giri's ashram in the city.

## DeNapoli/Performing Materiality

By whom impelled, by whom compelled,  
does the mind soar forth?  
By whom enjoined does the breath,  
march on as the first?  
By whom is this speech impelled,  
with which people speak?  
And who is the god that joins  
the sight and hearing?

That which is the hearing behind hearing,  
the thinking behind thinking,  
the speech behind speech, the sight behind sight—  
It is also the breathing behind breathing—  
Freed completely from these,  
the wise become immortal,  
when they depart from this world.

Sight does not reach there;  
neither does thinking or speech.  
We don't know, we can't perceive,  
how would one point it out.  
It is far different from what is known.  
And it is farther than the unknown—  
so we have heard from men of old,  
who have explained it all to us.

...Learn that that alone is brahman,  
and not what they here venerate (*Kena Upaniṣad*, 1.1-5; Olivelle, trans., 1996, 227).

The imagery in both Ganga Giri's and the *Kena Upaniṣad's* teachings emphasizes the idea that God (*bhagvān*; *sāin*; *brahman*) represents the inner-controller (*antaryāmin*) of the body, by which power it moves, hears, sees, knows, thinks, feels, and exists. The body is really nothing without God; its seeming power constitutes a function of God's ultimate power. Ganga Giri underscores this interpretation by explaining that the body "has no worth"; that "it is not worth even a single rupee" because, without God's life-giving force, it remains "like a stone," meaning that it becomes lifeless. Not only that, the body is also impermanent. When God's enervating presence emerges from the body after its death, it will either be "thrown into a pit" or, as Ganga Giri also says, consumed by the flames of a funeral pyre. Either way, Ganga Giri's statements seem to indicate that the body lacks any value of its own. Her use of the house symbol buoys her claim by suggesting that the body/house represents merely a temporary physical structure that will eventually deteriorate until it falls apart altogether and is replaced by a new structure. What the body means to Ganga Giri, however, hardly ends here. Notice that her comment, "It is not a sin to live in the house, but don't let the house live in you. Don't keep the house in your mind," implies that there is nothing essentially or inherently bad, wrong, or dangerous about the body.

Ganga Giri's idea of the body signals an important detour from the dominant understanding of its symbol expressed in the *Upaniṣads*. To quote from the *Maitreya Upaniṣad*:

"Made with its mother's and father's filth, this body...is a filthy house of joy and grief" (cited from Olivelle 1998, 190). In sharp contrast, to Ganga Giri, the "sin," to invoke her language, is not the body itself, but rather people's attachment to it, which, as her teaching tacitly conveys, produces the dangerous feelings of desire, greed, and ignorance that individually and collectively lead to human destruction. Hence, the act of keeping the body, "in the mind," as Ganga Giri stresses, "is bad," not the mere fact of having one. The very thought of having a body is illusory, because it not "ours." The body belongs instead to God, and not to the being embodied in/by it.

Even though her words hint that the value of the body is essentially neutral, Ganga Giri's discourse still indexes an implicit tension between its perceived worth and worthlessness. On the one hand, Ganga Giri says the body "has no worth"; on the other hand, however, she implies the exact opposite—that the body does have value because it signifies the abode of the divine, the sacred place where God "sits." Recall that Ganga Giri frames her teaching by foregrounding that "God exists in everything, and is everywhere," including the body. It, too, she suggests, serves as the house of God. The *sādhus* sing a *bhajan* that illustrates the view of the body as God's temple:

Lord, you made magnificent temples for worshipping you.  
Lord, you made magnificent temples for worshipping you.

Who knows the extent of your wondrous power?  
Who knows the extent of your wondrous power?

Who has discovered your secret mysteries?  
Who has discovered your secret mysteries?

Lord, you made magnificent temples for worshipping you.  
Lord, you made magnificent temples for worshipping you.

Every sage and *sādhu* shall meditate upon you, Lord.  
Every sage and *sādhu* shall meditate upon you, Lord.

You are in the water, you are in the earth  
You are in the water, you are in the earth

You are in the mind, you are in the body  
You are in the mind, you are in the body

Lord, you made magnificent temples for worshipping you.  
Lord, you made magnificent temples for worshipping you.  
Your form is great and incomparable  
Your form is great and incomparable

Lord, you made magnificent temples for worshipping you.  
Lord, you made magnificent temples for worshipping you.

Lord, you are in every community, you are in every leader.

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Lord, you are in every community, you are in every leader.

Lord, you are in the leaves of every branch  
Lord, you are in the leaves of every branch

Lord, you made magnificent temples for worshipping you.  
Lord, you made magnificent temples for worshipping you.

Lord, you are in every heart and in every form.  
Lord, you are in every heart and in every form.

Lord, you made magnificent temples for worshipping you.  
Lord, you made magnificent temples for worshipping you.

Lord, you made both kings and paupers  
Lord, you made both kings and paupers

You have created a happy kingdom  
You have created a happy kingdom

Lord, you made magnificent temples for worshipping you.  
Lord, you made magnificent temples for worshipping you.

Lord, your play is unfathomable  
Lord, your play is unfathomable

Lord, you made magnificent temples for worshipping you.  
Lord, you made magnificent temples for worshipping you.

The illusory power of every false place  
The illusory power of every false place

Why do you make idiots confused by these things?  
Why do you make idiots confused by these things?

Lord, you made magnificent temples for worshipping you.  
Lord, you made magnificent temples for worshipping you.

Four female *sādhus*, namely Ganga Giri, Gita Puri, Jamuna Bharti, and Tulsi Giri, sang this *bhajan* in the context of an afternoon *satsang* at Gita Puri's ashram located in a village north of Udaipur. I was the only householder who participated in this group sing with the *sādhus*. Apart from singing *bhajans*, the *sādhus* also recited the fifth chapter of the *Rāmcaritmānas*, the *Sundarkāōō* ("the Beautiful Book"). As the *sādhus* sang this and other *bhajans*, Tulsi Giri moved her body gently to its rhythm, making various gestures (*mudras*) with her hands, while Gita Puri played the tambourine and Jamuna Bharti beat the cymbals. Ganga Giri, who led most of the singing in this *satsang*, closed her eyes as she performed each and every song. For the *sādhus*, singing involves using their bodies, as much as their minds, not only to understand the songs' meanings, but also to experience the songs themselves. The *sādhus* envision their *bhajans* as

sacred vehicles of wisdom and, equally important, spiritual entities whose materializations in the form of sound would be impossible without the use of the body. In another *satsang* context Ganga Giri explains to a predominantly householder audience that “The mouth is the place from where we speak; this [pointing to the mouth] is where the sound comes. We see through our eyes. We smell through our noses. We hear through our ears. You can hear what I’m speaking through your ears? All this is the miracle [*pratāp*] of the body.” Both the *sādhus*’ expressive and somatic performances represent the body as a catalyst for religious experience. Notice that their *bhajan* excerpted above states that God resides everywhere: in the body, in the earth, in every leaf of every tree, in every leader and follower, *et cetera*. God’s form and the world’s myriad forms are really the same thing. The whole physical creation signifies God’s glorious temple.

Another *bhajan* that Ganga Giri, in particular, performs before audiences of householders and *sādhus* further situates her statements in an experiential context that her listeners, on account of their own somatic experiences, can understand. This song offers an insightful interpretation of what the body means to Ganga Giri and possibly to her devotees.

O *sants*, my tongue is singing *bhajans*.  
The bright diamond shining in the body is my satisfaction.  
If it shines in you, the diamond will make both your body and mind bright.

We’ve met the *sadguru* in the form of Ram.  
We’ve got the *sadguru* in the form of *bhajans*.  
We join hands to those walking on the path of *bhakti*.

My tongue is singing *bhajans*.

In the seven seas, the water is very deep/2  
The real [*sugra*] devotees are filling their glasses and drinking a lot;  
The fake [*nugra*] devotees are standing on the shore, thirsty.

My tongue is earning *bhajans*.

O *sants*, this is what Gorakh and Kabir have said.  
The real devotees are walking on the path of *bhakti*.

In the fort of Chittoor, Mira Bai is worshipping Kali/2  
She had a water pot on her head and released it in the river.  
O *sants*, my tongue is earning *bhakti*.

O *sants*, Gorakh and Kabir have said that  
The real devotees are walking on the path of *bhakti*.

O *sants*, my tongue is earning *bhajans*.

Don’t run away from your body;  
It will be filled with diamonds some day/2

O *sants*, my tongue is earning *bhajans*.

This *bhajan* underscores the beneficial value of the body for spiritual awakening. Indeed, it implores, "Don't run away from your body/It will be filled with diamonds someday." The *bhajan* pushes back at the Brahmanical notion that the body constitutes a transient and loathsome material shell that is, at worst, to be escaped and denied, and, at best, to be controlled and disciplined. Rather, in this *bhajan*, the body qualifies as an intelligent companion, and not as a dumb foe, on the path to freedom. Thus, unlike the Brahmanical renouncer who, in the Sanskritic literature, intentionally eschews the body in his desire to be rid of it, in the vernacular-language *bhakti* poetry, the devotee (*bhakt*) fiercely engages it. The *bhajan* indicates that the *bhakt* needs the body to experience the divinity housed within it. Without the body, the *bhakt* also cannot access the "bright diamond shining" within it. But what does the diamond mean in this *bhajan*?

As with the house image, jewels, too, appear as prolific symbols in the *sādhus'* practices and in the rhetoric of the *bhakti* poet-saints, especially that of the *nirgunī sants* (Hawley 2005; Hess 2002; Lorenzen 1995; 1996; Hawley and Juergensmeyer 1988; Schomer 1987; Vaudeville 1987). Kabir often speaks of precious jewels in the poetry attributed to him, and in one poem he says, "A diamond fell in the market/lay in the trash/Many busy fools passed buy/A tester took it away" (Bijak, Hess trans., 2002, 109). Another of Kabir's poems relates, "You don't find: diamonds in storerooms/sandal trees in rows/lions in flocks/holy men in herds" (Hess, 109).

Several scholars have discussed the meanings of polyvalent symbols like the diamond in *nirgunī sant* poetry. In his examination of three different versions of a *nirgunī bhajan* attributed to Kabir titled "Precious Gem," the refrains of which resonate with those in Ganga Giri's *bhajan*, and which were performed by three different male Jogi<sup>30</sup> mendicants of eastern Uttar Pradesh, Edward O. Henry (1991) glosses the diamond as "life itself, which here is seen as an opportunity to earn salvation or release (*mukti*), through devotion" (234). Along these lines, in his analysis of one version of the 'Precious Gem' *bhajan*, David Lorenzen (1996) identifies the diamond as "a symbol both of the difficult to achieve human birth, and of mystic illumination" (218).<sup>31</sup>

In her interpretation of these symbols, Ganga Giri emphasizes that the diamond and other precious gems represent the virtue of knowledge (*jñān*). In her use of the word 'knowledge,' Ganga Giri means precisely the revelatory/liberating wisdom, which she classifies as the "*brahma-jñān*" or the "*ātma-jñān*," terms she employs interchangeably, that releases devotees from the clutching chains of their worldly illusions. The point of the *bhajan*, though, is that the "shining diamond" of salvific knowledge lies within the body. To that extent, as God's shrine, the body also signifies the house of the divine wisdom. To expand on a point I made

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<sup>30</sup> According to Henry, the Jogi mendicants from whom he collected his *nirgunī bhajans* were householders, and not ascetics as many of the villagers had assumed (the villagers thought that since their repertoires had consisted of purely *nirgunī* and philosophical *bhajans*, that the singers themselves had been wandering ascetics). The Jogi caste is a community of weavers from Uttar Pradesh and is believed to be descended from the Nāth panthis. For this reason, many wandering Jogis sing the *bhajans* of Kabir and the Nāths. Interestingly, the Jogis whom Henry interviewed seemed to have appropriated both householder and *sādhu* identities. See Henry 1988 and 1991.

<sup>31</sup> Lorenzen uses the text as sung by Abul Hassan, one of Henry's collaborators, and which appears in Henry's monograph, *Chant the Names of God* (1988).

earlier, escaping from the body in this *bhakti* framework amounts to running away from knowledge and, more urgently, to running away from God. The *bhakt* knows God only by entering the house of wisdom. Knowledge, therefore, is accessed by means of the body and is experienced in the body. What is more, in this *bhajan*, knowledge connotes the complementary spheres of the body and the mind. Knowledge no longer represents the exclusive domain of the intellect in competition with that of the body. As the third line of the song says: "If it [knowledge] shines in you, the diamond will make both your body and mind bright." The *bhajan*, thus, confounds the analytic dualities of body and mind by suggestively repositioning the latter within the realm of somatic experience. It grounds knowledge, the mind, and God in physicality. By doing so, the *bhajan* implies that the mind designates a kind of subtle matter, even while making the claim that the gross matter of the body meaningfully assists the *bhakt* on the spiritual path. In this way, the *bhajan* emphasizes the salient role of the body for liberation, as well as conveys the idea that the "precious" God-experience is impossible without its help. Just as the body depends on God for its life, God, too, in the *bhajan*, needs the body in order to be known by God's devotees.

A corollary idea expressed in the *bhajan* concerns the essential sacrality and purity of the body. In the Brahmanical texts, the body is essentially impure and polluted. In this framework, the fact that the body was conceived through sexual intercourse distinguishes it as a permanent "source of all pollution" (Olivelle 1998, 190). In the vivid words of the *Maitreya Upaniṣad*:

By its very nature, foul secretions continuously ooze out from its nine openings. It smells foul and it contains awful filth. When it is touched a bathe is ordained. Through its mother the body is impure at birth; in birth-impurity it is born. It is impure also through death. When it is touched a bath is ordained (cited from Olivelle 1998, 190).

Moreover, the Brahmanical literature mostly considers the notion of purifying what is by its very nature impure to be a laughable oxymoron. "Let him abandon this impermanent dwelling place of the elements," the *Nārada-parivrājaka* exhorts to its intended interlocutors. The text continues: "It has beams of bones tied with tendons. It is plastered with flesh and blood and thatched with skin. It is foul-smelling, filled with feces and urine, and infested with old-age and grief. Covered with dust and harassed by pain, it is the abode of disease" (cited from Olivelle 1998, 191).

The *sādhus'* practices question the Brahmanical assumption that the body expresses a lasting source of pollution and impurity. Their performances articulate instead that, at its very core, much like the stunning perfection of a shining diamond, the body designates an immediate source of everlasting purity and power. The body's contact with putatively impure substances such as feces, urine, blood, and sexual fluids, may negatively affect the integrity of its outer purity, but never diminishes its inner purity and sanctity. Besides this, as a persistent symbol of the sacrosanct house of God, the holiest of all 'structures,' the body has to be pure by virtue of its proximity to divine source, and because, as the *sādhus* explain, "God carved it from love." To the *sādhus*, God's creating the body, regardless of its forms, makes it sacred. Tulsi Giri explains:

Who made us? Did our mother and father create us? We were born through our parents, they gave birth [*janam diyā*] to us, but they didn't create us. Only God [*prabhu*] created us. The one who is here [pointing to her heart] carved us from love. Our mother and father gave birth to us. By giving birth to us, they have become our gods. See, our mother is like mother earth, and our father is like father sky. But God fashioned this carving. First God made the head; then God made the rest of the body. God lastly made the feet. God makes human beings starting from the top. If you paint a picture, you start from the top right? If you write a letter, you start from here [pointing high with her hands] and make your way down to the bottom [pointing low with her hands]. Isn't it so?...God made us, but we have both our parents in us. I mean, the body needs both the mother and the father to be born. You can't have a child without a father and a mother, right? So, our bones come from our father. And, our blood and skin come from our mother. When we are in our mother's stomach, her blood feeds us. The baby drinks the blood and grows fat. After it is born, the mother's blood becomes the milk that the baby drinks. But your bones are your father's...Inside everything is God. We have to remember this. God sits in our feelings [*bhāvnā*].

In this telling narrative of human embryology, Tulsi Giri attributes the "carving" of the body to God, the ultimate architect, but she also acknowledges the mother's and the father's roles in the process of human creation. They, too, according to Tulsi Giri, become "our" gods by "giving birth to us." Her comment suggests that the manifestation on earth of God's human creation is powerful enough to require the bodies of two sexes, thus establishing the ontological importance of both female and male bodies. Tulsi Giri foregrounds this point: "...the body needs both the mother and father to be born. You can't have a child without a father and a mother, right?" Similarly, her repeated use of the phrase "give birth to us" performatively places the responsibility for human embodiment on the mother as well as the father. It is not only the mother who gives birth to a child, but the father, too. The rhetorical power of the phrase "giving birth" is worth exploring here. Tulsi Giri's language implies that "giving birth," that is, bringing forth life, identifies more than the moment in which the fetus emerges from the mother's womb. Rather, it constitutes every known and unknown phase in the magical process of human creation, beginning with conception. Indeed, God may create the general blueprint for human life, but the parents themselves supply the specific and special materials, traits, and characteristics, all of which contribute to the development of their child. The father provides the fetus its bones, while the mother gives it its blood and skin. But the mother's contribution doubles that of the father's, because throughout this process, she also feeds the baby with her precious blood, and after it is born, with her milk. Notice, though, that none of these symbols have the negative connotations that they have in the Brahmanical literature. In Tulsi Giri's view, both parents participate as co-partners in the mysterious genesis of life, and together they bring a new being into the world.

Tulsi Giri's idea of materiality in connection with birth and the body offers a compelling counterpoint to those articulated by the voices of the competing Brahmanical traditions. In contrast to women's active role in human creation in Tulsi Giri's thinking, Brahmanical texts tend to relegate women to a passive and subordinate position vis-à-vis men. For instance, the *Laws of Manu*, an orthodox Brahmanical text on Hindu religious law, features, as Wendy Doniger (1997) discusses in her examination of its conceptions of the body, "two conflicting models of paternity" (170). Doniger's analysis lays out the details and logic of both models, but

what most captures our attention in her deft discussion has to do with the similarities in their constructions of women, and the body, as “vessels for the procreation of male heirs” (170).<sup>32</sup>

Likewise, although the rivaling Brahmanical traditions of renunciation and householding battled ideologically over the meaning of the body and its value, both orthodoxies appear to have shared the general patriarchal vision of women’s perceived inferiority in matters of sexual procreation. The *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* emphasizes: “A wife is called wife, because in her [the husband] is born again” as his son (cited from Olivelle 1998, 195).<sup>33</sup> The renunciant texts, however, take the idea of women’s subordinate status to a viciously extreme level, reducing women to their vaginas and casting their wombs as the vitriolic gateways to hell and human suffering. Here is what the *Nārada-parivṛāja* has to say on this issue: “Even though a woman’s private parts are not different from a deep and festering ulcer, men generally deceive themselves by imagining them to be different. I salute those who take delight in a piece of skin split in two scented by the breaking of the wind! What could be more rash!” (cited from Olivelle 1998, 198).

Not surprisingly, no such idea is found in the *sādhus’* practices. It is unlikely for the *sādhus*, many of whom have given birth to children with whom they still remain in close contact,<sup>34</sup> to castigate women’s bodies, and the body in general, to the nasty netherworlds. In the *sādhus’* practices, as Tulsi Giri’s narrative shows, women, and their bodies, are generally viewed in a positive light. In the weighty matter of procreation, not only are they thought to be equal to men but, just as important, surpass them on account of the extra effort women’s bodies selflessly and automatically give in terms of continuous food supply to their fetuses during pregnancy. The corollary thought of coming into *sansār* evokes celebratory comments and sensitive reflections from the *sādhus*, rather than feelings of grief and despair. Many of the *sādhus* in my field study agree that the human experiences of birth and death serve as perpetual reminders of God’s power (and form) in the world. Recall the urgent plea Ganga Giri makes in her teaching on the value of the body discussed earlier, in which she emphasizes that people must “concentrate on God.” In her words: “Concentration is like a training of the heart/mind (*jī*). Eat, drink, sleep, speak, meet each other, serve each other, do everything. Just keep your concentration on God.” Tulsi Giri similarly ends her narrative with the prescient prescription for everyone to “remember God.”

But the *sādhus’* feminine gender alone does not sufficiently explain the reason for their alternative views of the body. There are also pertinent structural matters to consider. More specifically, none of the *sādhus* with whom I worked maintain institutional ties with the Daśanāmi or Nāth orders in which they received their initiations. The *sādhus’* becoming renunciants of one of these two orders has to do with the fact that their gurus were also initiated into one of these two traditions, and not with any desire to seek membership in the

<sup>32</sup> As Doniger also discusses, Manu’s misogynistic views diverge sharply from later Indian thinking that grants women a much more active part in human creation. See Doniger, “Medical and mythical constructions of the body in Hindu texts,” in *Religion and the Body*, edited by Sarah Coakley, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 167-184.

<sup>33</sup> Another line of the same text exclaims that, unlike the son who brings fortune, “the daughter brings grief.” Cited from Patrick Olivelle, “Deconstruction of the Body in Indian Asceticism,” in *Asceticism*, edited by Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.195.

<sup>34</sup> For many of the *sādhus*, their children have become their “disciples,” who serve their gurus with love.

Daśanāmi or Nāth communities, or to follow their ideologies. Moreover, none of the *sādhus* call themselves as Daśanāmis or as Nāths. They simply say, “We are *sādhus*,” or “we are *sants*,” or “We are the devotees of God.” Only when I asked them to name their orders did the *sādhus* specify their Daśanāmi or Nāth identities. According to the *sādhus*, the particular tradition that initiates a *sādhu* is irrelevant. What matters concerns the teacher who gives the initiation and the quality of her/his knowledge; its power, as the *sādhus* told me, to cross devotees over the ocean of existence. Ganga Giri says, “If the teacher doesn’t know anything, what will the student know?”

Furthermore, while some of the *sādhus* maintain contact with their gurus (most of whom live in different states), all but one of them live independently of their teachers in ashrams built from the donations of their devotees on land purchased through those funds. Similarly, the majority of the *sādhus* live alone, rather than in monastic communities. No monastic head or authority, male or female, exists to whom these women must answer. In the few cases where a *sādhu* shares her space with a male *sādhu* (there were no female *sādhus* living together during the time I conducted my field study), whom she regards as her guru-brother (a *sādhu* initiated by the same guru as the female *sādhu*), the female member of the pair benefits in that relationship. Why? Because, structurally speaking, in most cases, the ashram belongs to her, whose monies she herself manages, and/or her advanced age places her at the higher end of the social hierarchy.<sup>35</sup> I met two male Daśanāmi *sādhus* who were sent by their gurus to live with an older female *sādhu* usually of the same order as a safety measure against the increasing thefts of ashrams (and, in two instances, the murders of two male *sādhus*) occurring in the jungles outside of Udaipur district. In these contexts, the female *sādhu* makes the decisions concerning ashram management, and in a fascinating role-reversal, the male *sādhu* cleans the ashram, prepares meals for the female *sādhu* and her devotees, and runs errands for her. Having a male *sādhu* who can look after things and take care of himself allows the female *sādhus* to travel and raise money for their ashrams. In light of these factors, we can comprehend why the *sādhus* I worked with have the freedom to articulate religious worldviews that are different from the norm.<sup>36</sup>

### **“Bhajan Singing Has Taken Hold of Me”: Renunciant Practice as Embodying Experience**

The themes to “remember God” and to “concentrate on God” express a revealing pattern in the *sādhus’* practices, illustrating their understandings that “God sits in the feelings” and/or in the “heart-mind.” Every female *sādhu* with whom I have worked tells me that God “is found in the emotions,” and that the devotee “meets [*milnā*]” God by experiencing those emotions. Their views invoke the popular paradigms of religion and materiality discussed in the *bhakti* literature. As the extensive body of scholarship of Hindu devotional traditions shows, ecstatic religious experience is an intensely emotional one (Hawley 2005; Ramanujan 1999; Haberman 1994; Erndl 1993; McDaniel 1989; Schomer 1987). The Hindi words the *sādhus* use

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<sup>35</sup> There were four instances in which a male *sādhu* and a female *sādhu* pair had lived as husband and wife before they took renunciation. I do not include these renunciant “couples” in my analyses that follow of the structural relationships between male *sādhus* and female *sādhus* who reside at the same ashram.

<sup>36</sup> I am grateful to the prescient critique of an anonymous reviewer that helped me to clarify the structural social issues that undergird the *sādhus’* ability to perform alternative worldviews from the Brahmanical ideology.

are *bhāv*, *bhāvnā*, *man*, and *jī*. Their meanings are fluid and flexible in colloquial Hindi. These terms connote the concepts of the emotions, the feelings, the body, the mind, and the spirit.<sup>37</sup> The *sādhus* deploy these terms interchangeably in their practices. In their use of these terms the *sādhus* emphasize the idea that religious experience (i.e., “concentrating on God”) constitutes a somatic experience (i.e., “encountering God in the feelings/emotions”), decentering the static conceptual binaries between matter and spirit; body and mind; purity and impurity; and religion and materiality.

In the *sādhus'* perspectives, which their performances well articulate, people connect with the divine through their feelings of love and devotion, longing and separation, and/or compassion and communion. The *sādhus'* renunciant performances evoke these and other God-linked material experiences in variously related ways. The devotional gatherings in which the *sādhus* perform their rhetoric of renunciation, namely *satsang* (literally, “gathering of truth”), heighten and, in effect, create sense of community among the participants across the continuums of caste, class, gender, and education. *Satsang* can happen anywhere and with anyone; to the *sādhus*, it offers an everyday context where they “remember” and “meet” God. Similarly, the smell and sight of burning sandalwood and other resins at their ashrams, and ephemeral smoke rising from their *dhūnīs* (sacred fire pit) into the air;<sup>38</sup> the panoply of religious imagery at their sacred sites; and the food stuffs people eat and the piping hot chai they drink, which the *sādhus* themselves prepare and serve to everyone, heighten participants' bodily senses.

Furthermore, people's psychosomatic participation (i.e., the act of singing and/or hearing songs with their bodies and minds) in *satsang* performance evokes, as French social anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu has explained, participants' “social senses” of justice, good taste, morality, disgust, and common sense (cited from McGuire 2008, 99; see also Bell 1998 and Graham 1991). Thus, *satsang*, coupled with the performances that arise in such contexts, bring about kinesthetic (“the sensations experienced by the body in movement”) and synesthetic (“the evocation of an integrated and overwhelming sensory experience”) material experiences within participants (Bell 1998, 209), effecting their divine remembering. The *sādhus'* sense of God in practice resonates with Meredith McGuire's (2008) insights on the performativity of lived religion. She says: “Lived religion is constituted by the practices people use to remember, share, enact, adapt, create, and combine the stories out of which they live (98)...Our sense of [God]...is based on a myriad of remembering practices involving our bodies and emotions as well as our thoughts” (99). Remembering God, to *sādhus*, is feeling God within the heart-mind *and* body.

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<sup>37</sup> The meanings of these specific terms overlap not only in formal dictionary representations, but also in the *sādhus'* practices. For more specific definitions, see R.S. McGregor, editor, *Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary* (Oxford and Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993)—*bhāv*, p. 765; *bhāvnā*, p. 766; *jī*, p. 373; and *man*, p. 788.

<sup>38</sup> As with the symbol of ash discussed earlier, the *dhūnī* represents the impermanence and illusory quality of worldly existence. *Sādhus* across renunciant traditions, if they have a permanent place to reside, keep a *dhūnī* as a reminder of the transitory nature of existence and their ultimate goal in life—liberation from *sansār*. All of the *sādhus* with whom I worked kept a burning *dhūnī*, and offered the ash from their *dhūnī* to their visitors and devotees as *prasād* (blessed offering).

The *sādhus'* feelings of "meeting God" that are evoked in *satsang* by means of performance become established as memories and, subsequently, embedded within their bodies and their heart-minds. Therefore, the *sādhus'* practices perform their remembering of God by accessing their embodied memories. More significant, their acts of remembering God embody God as a concrete experience within their body-minds and, hence, identify a (re)embodying practice in their everyday renunciant worlds. Citing sociologist Daniele Hervieu-Leger who sees the phenomenon of religion as a chain of memory, McGuire (2008) contends that people's memories link their spiritualities<sup>39</sup> with their ordinary material lives. She explains,

Most people think of the transmission of such memory as a cognitive process, with children learning about the community's religious beliefs, scripture, and norms. But Hervieu-Leger reminds us that there are other important components, such as emotion, that are transmitted as part of that memory. I suggest that religious or spiritual practices are ways individuals engaged their socialized senses in the activation of embodied memory. Bodies matter very much, both in the individual's spiritual life and in the development of a community—a community of memory. (McGuire 2008, 100).

The theory of memory as embodying experience of religiosity is not an exclusively Western concept. Parallel notions are voiced in the Indian subcontinent as early as the third century CE. One text that presents a systematic model of human embodiment and its conditioning through spiritual discipline is the *Yoga Sūtra* attributed to Patañjali. By the time of its redaction, the *Yoga Sūtra* was in conversation with the Brahmanical and Buddhist as well as Jain traditions, and, like its interlocutors, attempted to outline its own methodology about how to best escape the worldly temptations and trappings of *sansār* (Stoler Miller 1996, ix-xiv; 1-25). Because this text was composed in a rich religious-cultural milieu during South Asia's second urbanization,<sup>40</sup> the *Yoga Sūtra* employs a grammar characteristic of Indian renunciant ideologies in general at the time, and often works off of the established meanings of this 'language' in its development of a theory of religious freedom (Stoler Miller 1996; Samuel 2008).<sup>41</sup>

The *Yoga Sūtra* shares with most of the renouncer traditions the perception that matter and spirit signify two fundamentally distinct domains of reality through which individuals construct and perceive their worlds. In the *Yoga Sūtra*, as in the Brahmanical literature in particular, transcendence of matter in all its manifestations constitutes the principal prerequisite for spiritual liberation. To that extent, the *Yoga Sūtra*, as with its Brahmanical counterpart,

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<sup>39</sup> The concept 'spirituality' is often used cavalierly in public discourse. My usage follows McGuire's (2008), which she defines in the following way: "the everyday ways ordinary people attend to their spiritual lives," p. 98.

<sup>40</sup> The concept of the "Second Urbanization" refers to the development of city-states and, along with that, new ways of conceiving the idea of the 'individual,' in South Asia during the first millennium BCE. This phenomenon is characterized as a second urbanization, because of the thought that South Asia experienced its first urbanization during the Indus Valley Civilization (ca. 2500-1900 BCE). For a detailed discussion of the Second Urbanization, see Geoffrey Samuel, *The Origins of Yoga and Tantra: Indic Religions to the Thirteenth Century*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 41-60.

<sup>41</sup> My descriptions of the historical and ideological contexts of the *Yoga Sūtra* are based on Stoler Miller's helpful discussion in the introduction of her translations of the *Yoga Sūtra*. See Stoler Miller, trans., "Introduction," in *Yoga: Discipline of Freedom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 1-25.

promotes the dualistic oppositions of spirit and matter in its theology of liberation. So, while 'yoga' means "to unite," in the Indian traditions it widely designates the practice of "yoking" oneself to a spiritual discipline to release oneself from matter, and not integrating one's body and one's mind in practice (Stoler Miller 1996, ix). Nonetheless, much like the *sādhus'* practices, the *Yoga Sūtra* locates the mind and its concomitant workings of thought, intelligence, and ego within somatic experience (Stoler Miller 1996, 14). In this model, mind is "material in nature," and not opposed to matter (Ibid). Instead, the mind represents, as Stoler Miller (1996) describes, a "psychomental evolute of matter" (Ibid). Even so, the mind and the body—indeed, all material components—must be completely transcended for liberation to occur. The *Yoga Sūtra* conceptualizes the experience of liberation as a realization of one's true identity as *Puruṣa* (Pure Spirit), wholly distinguished from *Prakṛti* (Pure Matter). But what keeps spirit chained to matter is the behavioral accumulation and activation of subliminal memories, which are stored in the psychomental evolutes, and which make a person believe that her/his spirit and matter are the same. Stoler Miller explicates the theory behind Patañjali's memory model, which I quote in full:

The central notion here is that any mental or physical act leaves behind memory "impressions" or "traces" that can subtly influence a person's thought, character, and moral behavior. The store of memory is composed of subliminal impressions (*samskāra*) and memory traces (*vāśana*), which are the residue of experience that clings to an individual throughout life and, in the Indian view, from death to rebirth. The relation between the "turnings of thought" (*citta-vṛtti*) and memory is basic to Patañjali's epistemology. When thought passes from one modification into another, the former state is not lost but rather is preserved in memory as a subliminal impression or memory trace. Thus, thought is always generating memories, and these memories are a store of potential thoughts, available to be actualized into new turnings of thought. The very habit of thinking not only generates but preserves memories, like the roots of a tuber that spread underground and produce fresh tubers which blossom in season (Stoler Miller 1996, 15).

The *sādhus'* practices clearly disassemble the dualisms illustrated in the *Yoga Sūtra*. In their interpretations, spiritual discipline evokes an integrated experience of union of spirit and matter because, after all, God exists within the corporeal. And yet, their theories of remembering interface with the model of memory described in the *Yoga Sūtra*. The textual model does not supersede the *sādhus'* vernacular model, but rather complements it, therefore adding to scholars' understandings of Indian conceptions of religion and materiality expressed in theory and in practice. The *sādhus'* practices of "remembering God," I suggest, constitute their embodying experiences of the "meeting" of spirit and matter. In their practices, the *sādhus* maintain their connections to renunciant and yogic traditions but rework those ideologies through use of *bhakti* frameworks in their constructions of what renunciation and the body, and women's bodies, mean to them. At the same time, the *sādhus'* practices depict that popular performances enable them not only to express, but more important, to embody renunciation as materiality, and *vice versa*, in a *sant* way. Let us now shift our focus to a *bhajan* featured in many of the *sādhus'* repertoires that constructs the idea of action as the bridge between the spheres of materiality and spirituality.

## DeNapoli/Performing Materiality

The urge of *bhajans* has really taken hold of me.<sup>42</sup>  
The Supreme Guru, Hari,<sup>43</sup> is inside of my heart.

Yes, the great words have taken hold of me.  
The Supreme Guru, Hari, is inside of my heart.

Oh, yes, great words have taken hold of me.  
The Supreme Guru, Hari, is inside of my heart.

Everybody is saying it has taken hold of me.  
And nobody is saying it has not.

Everybody is saying it has taken hold of me.  
And nobody is saying it has not.

But when it takes hold of a knowing man,  
He forgets about his body.

The Supreme Guru, Hari, is inside of my heart.  
Yes, the urge of *bhajans* has really taken hold over me.  
The Supreme Guru, Hari, is inside of my heart.

It took hold of Dhruva,  
It took hold of Prahlad,  
And it took hold of the butcher.

It took hold of Dhruva  
It took hold of Prahlad  
And it took hold of the Prostitute,  
Who was not having qualities.  
And it took hold of Mira Bai in such a way [that]  
She left the comforts of the palace.  
The Supreme Guru is inside of my heart.

It took hold of Rama  
It took hold of Lakshman  
It took hold of mother, Sita.  
It took hold of Hanuman in such a way [that]  
He jumped into the water.

The Supreme Guru is inside of my heart.  
The Jatis were taken hold of.  
It took hold of the Satis.

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<sup>42</sup> The Hindi for the *bhajar's* refrain is: *bhajan dhun khūb lāgī ho jī re*.

<sup>43</sup> *Bhakti* rhetoric, including *sant* rhetoric, contributes a wealth of terms to describe the concept of God. See Karine Schomer and W.H. McLeod, editors, *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1987).

And, it took hold of 88,000 *sādhus*.  
And it took hold of several thousands of *sādhus*.

It took hold of the Jatis,  
It took hold of the Satis,  
And it took hold of many thousands of *sādhus*.  
But it took hold of Vanita from Braj in such a way [that]  
She forgot her body [that is, everything].

The Supreme Hari is inside of my heart.  
The urge of *bhajans* has really taken hold of [me].  
The Supreme Guru, Hari, is inside of my heart.

It took hold of Bharathari in such a way [that]  
He left the comforts of the palace.  
And Gopichand left sixteen [wives].

The Supreme Guru, Hari, is inside of my heart.

It took hold of Dhanna, Pipa, Ravidas, and Pumba.  
And, it took hold of the barber, Senva.

It took hold of Dhanna, Pipa, Ravidas, and Pumba.  
And, it took hold of Senva.

The Supreme Guru, Hari, is inside of my heart.

Religious practice holds the precious key to the house of God. This *bhajan* makes explicit the popular *bhakti* vision that religious practice is powerful and powerfully transforms the devotee. Its message echoes in dramatic speech the insights of analytic theories of ritual performance in its emphases that through religious action something essentially significant happens to the *bhakt*, and something powerful is produced from the experience (Gade 2004; Bell 1997; Rappaport 1992; Clothey 1988). The *bhajan* substantiates its claim about the efficacy of practice by invoking an almost unwieldy number of devotees' names. *Bhakti* personalities from the *Purāṇas*, the *Epics*, the medieval *bhakti* poet-saint literature, and the regional expressive traditions, like Dhruv, Prahlad, the Butcher, the Prostitute, Dhanna, Pipa, Ravidas and Mira Bai, Ram and Sita, Gopichand and Bharathari, the Jatis and the Satis as well as the *sādhus*, and a swath of other *bhakts*, attest to the sanctifying power of spiritual practice.<sup>44</sup>

The particular practice underscored in the *bhajan* concerns that of *nāma-japa* (the repetition of God's name), which the *sādhus* associate primarily, but not exclusively, with singing *bhajans*. Ganga Giri prefaces her *bhajan satsangs* with the comment, "singing *bhajans* can make us live longer." Many of the *sādhus* liken *bhajan* singing to medicine and/or to food. Once, I heard Ganga Giri and Tulsi Giri planning a visit to the ashrams of other female *sādhus* in the area. When the name of one female *sādhū* came up Ganga Giri immediately retorted,

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<sup>44</sup> For readers who want to learn more about these and other characters, I encourage them to consult the work of David Lorenzen (1996), and especially the appendix to this work, which contains mythological sketches of *bhakts*.

"There are no *laḍḍūs*<sup>45</sup> over there!" My curiosity piqued, I asked her to explain what she meant by that statement. Ganga Giri responded, "They don't sing *bhajans* over there. That's it." On another occasion, Ganga shared a didactic narrative that brought together the tropes of medicine and food to convey the idea of the inherent transformative potentiality of practice. Here is her story:

Whenever a person goes to the market for something, the market-sellers will never say, "We don't have such-and-such." They will give you a bag of knowledge. If you go to the chemist, you will get medicine. The doctor, too, gives medicine. The medicine given is knowledge. I am saying knowledge is medicine. If I get a fever, I don't take medicine. I never ask for medicine from anybody. But if someone gives it to me, then I'll take it. Knowledge is medicine for those who know. If I take pills, they become pills of courage. If I get a fever, even then I will do the worship of God; I will make bread and eat it. The fever goes away only by working. I never stop working when I am sick. I continue to do what I have to do. Now, how many people come down with fevers? And what do they do? They rest. I never rest. If I have to sweep, then I sweep. If I have to bathe, then I bathe. If I have to make chai, then I make chai. If I have to wash clothes, then I wash them. If I am hungry, then I make bread and vegetables. Only after my work is completed do I sleep. But people say, "Oh, I have a cold." They grab a blanket and go to sleep. This is wrong. The fever becomes worse by sleeping. I don't even know the names of pills. There is only one treatment to cure people's afflictions and sufferings. Take the name of God. These are the sweet sweet pills that will erase the suffering. People suffer in millions of ways. Take the name of God and you will not suffer. Remember God! The memory of God must always be there.

Spiritual practice, like medicine, heals people. It heals their minds and their bodies of pain and disease. As a "pill of courage," religious practice restores human beings' psychosomatic equilibrium, harmony, and wholeness. As long as people continue to do it, spiritual practice keeps them healthy and happy. Conversely, without it, people become sick and dis-eased. In their articulations of this idea, notice, though, that Ganga Giri's story and the

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<sup>45</sup> A *laḍḍū* is an Indian sweet in the shape of a ball consisting of gram flour made with sugar, saffron, and other ingredients. Because of its association with the deities Krishna and Ganesha, the *laḍḍū* is thought to be an especially sacred treat and is distributed as *prasād* to devotees in many temples throughout India.

*bhajan* share an implicit understanding about the corporeal nature of spiritual discipline—that is, it not only has to happen with/in the body, but it also embodies (i.e., creates) religious experience as it happens with/in the body. So, just as taking medicine embodies and, precisely, creates healing, taking the powerful pill of God’s name by singing *bhajans* embodies, as Ganga Giri stresses, knowledge. In their practices, as discussed in my earlier analysis of the diamond trope, knowledge signifies God as well as divine wisdom. In this model, the *sādhus*’ singing creates their divine wisdom experience which, in effect, constitutes the memory traces that are (re)activated with every song performance in their realization of that experience. The *bhajan* locates the memory of divinity in the body *and* in the mind. In the words of its refrain: “Hari [God] is inside of my heart.”

Thus, the *sādhus*’ practices suggest that singing, for example, functions as an automatic conduit of communion that connects humans and God, body and heart-mind, and spirit and matter. It links these complementary constituents, so to speak, through the “doing,” in the action, and, of course, by the remembering. The concentration required of the *sādhus* and the other participants in performing their *bhajans* (recall Ganga Giri’s words: “Do anything, but whatever you do, concentrate on God [as you do it]”), the presence of others in the group sing, the smells and sights, and the sounds and tastes engaging *all* the senses simultaneously evoke a wholistic embodying experience within those participants that deeply affects their perceptions of their worlds, while effecting those very perceptions/experiences. Not surprisingly, after their *bhajan* sings the *sādhus*, and the participants, say that they “lost” themselves—and, for the householders, “forgot” everything they had to do on that day—during the *satsang*. The *bhajan* basically makes the same argument. Religious practice is so powerful that it caused the prince Gopichand to renounce his sixteen wives; it caused the prostitute to reform her ways; and it caused Vanita from Braj to lose all sense of her body. These fantastic claims of the *bhajan*, and the participants, readily indicate that the activity and “enjoyment [*ānand*]” of singing consumes devotees so completely that they become changed and transformed in the embodying process.

The *sādhus*’ rhetoric of “losing” or “forgetting” themselves calls attention to the dissolution of the boundaries between the spiritual and the corporeal. I emphasize here that the *bhajan*’s verses about devotees forgetting their bodies (and, I would add, their minds) while taking God’s name does not signify a latent claim about the worthlessness of the body. To my mind, the *bhajan* seems to argue the exact opposite—in the embodying of religious experience devotees no longer operate in the conceptual binaries of mind and body, spirit and matter, God and humanity, and purity and impurity. The remembering of religious experience makes these categories permeable to the extent that they merge and melt into each other and dissolve altogether. From this view, the embodied immanence (and memory) of spiritual awakening, I argue, effects and constitutes a transcendence of conceptual dualities, rather than a transcendence of materiality. The somatic quality of *sant* spirituality, which speaks to the devotional asceticism of the *sādhus*, is implicated further in the *bhajan* through its imagery of devotees who enjoy the powerful feelings evoked by singing God’s name. Remember, in the *sādhus*’ views, singing *bhajans* is equivalent to eating *laḍḍūs*. It is, as Ganga Giri says, a “sweet sweet” embodying event, making renunciant performance an essentially sensual experience of transformation.

### **Conclusions: Tasting the *Laḍḍū* of Renunciant Spirituality with Materiality**

Bodies matter very much in the practices of the Rajasthani female *sādhus*. Unlike their public discursive statements that deny the body's worth, their performances of song and story illuminate an experiential and embodied understanding of the body's integral role in renunciant piety. In their *bhajans*, the body stands for the corporeal shrine of God, made by God, in which perfect revelatory wisdom is found. The body, and knowledge, signifies a precious diamond for "those who know." Liberating wisdom is accessed and processed by the body. Moreover, its divine creation establishes its essential purity and sanctity. Furthermore, the body works with, rather than against, the *sādhū*-devotee on her quest for final liberation. It constitutes a dynamic structure, the perfection and power of which are revealed with the realization of God within.

The *sādhus* employ the classic Brahmanical symbols of the house, medicine, and food in their representations of the body but refashion their textual meanings in a positive way that speaks to their gendered experiences and concerns and promotes the ontological value of the female body. Not only the *sant bhakti* frameworks on which the *sādhus* draw in their renunciant performances, but also the vernacular-language rhetoric of their expressive practices contributes "a vocabulary of feelings" with which they imagine and articulate a new paradigm of the materiality as an alternative to that illustrated by the dominant Sanskrit model (Bynum 1996, 196). The *sādhus'* ideas that God is experienced "in the feelings" are framed through the lens of their mother tongues. In her study of notions of the body in the practices of medieval Christian female mystics, Carolyn Bynum argues that women's ideas and experiences of materiality were intimately linked to the languages in which they thought, wrote, and lived. She says:

In other words, part of the reason for the more open, experiential style of women's writings is the fact that women usually wrote not in the formal scholastic Latin taught in the universities, but in the vernaculars—that is, in the languages they grew up speaking. The major literary genres available in these languages were various kinds of love poetry and romantic stories: the vocabulary provided by such genres was therefore a vocabulary of feelings. A comparison of two women from much the same milieu, Mechtild of Hackeborn and Mechtild of Magdeburg, shows clearly that the one who wrote in Latin wrote more impersonally and to a much greater extent under the influence of the liturgy, whereas the vernacular poet wrote more experientially, with a greater sense both of personal vulnerability and of immediate and special relationship to God (Bynum 1996, 196).

The vocabulary of feelings and, I would add, of love in the *sādhus'* practices, indeed, establishes the special contiguity between spirituality and materiality through the transformative vehicle of religious performance. Singing *bhajans* acts as the key to the inner sanctum of divine experience. It constitutes an instrument for the purposeful cultivation, rather than for the harsh control, of the body. It also remedies the everyday realities of the body's materiality, registered in the forms of pain, suffering, and disease, restoring its natural state of health and harmony.

But religious practice does more than this. It performs, and thus creates, materiality by embodying (and enscripting) spiritual transformation in the body, and in the heart-mind, as it happens within, and by means of, the corporeal. Practice produces powerful and lasting emotions that become embedded as memories in the body-mind, activating them in the

constitution of religious experience. The embodying of such experience, and the concomitant "senses" evoked thenceforth in that process, creates the body as a conscious "knower" because it makes the body remember the feelings in which God "sits," and in that embodied remembering the devotee "meets" God, embodying through that relationship God's power and presence. In Ganga Giri's words, "the memory of God must always be there" for religious experience to occur. She, and the other *sādhus*, suggests that remembering as/in practice is equivalent to religious experience.

Practice, thus, performs divine remembering in the embodying of renunciant religious experience. The transformation effected in the re-remembering of spirit and matter collapses the familiar analytic oppositions that seem to define and structure everyday human experience. Body and mind; emotion and intellect; sacred and profane; and transcendence and immanence, all of these binaries blend together in the remembering of religious experience, in which the devotee loses all sense of self and other, while gaining access to the house of God within the body. Inside of this temple of divine corporeality, the devotee delights in the sweetness of the somatic experience of knowing and loving God. Remembering God through their performances of embodiment makes it possible for the *sādhus*, and those with whom they share their teachings and practices, to experience the delicious "*laḍḍūs*" of their spiritualities with their materialities.

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**Steeple and Spires: Exploring the Materiality of Built and Unbuilt Temples**  
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**Abstract**

This article looks more closely at how the very material presence of Swaminarayan temples, whether completed or not yet built, generates discourses that point to the experiencing of these sites. These discourses are interesting to probe for the ways in which they translate an experiential response to a Swaminarayan temple into perceptions and assessments about the BAPS community, about Hinduism, and about religion more broadly. And, as these narrative responses and their internal logics are predicated on their authors' informing categories and prior experiences, ones that, for example, allow the assessment about the BAPS community, Hinduism, and religion, they become available discursive arenas for understanding BAPS's American neighbours. Together, the BAPS temples can be seen as structures that stimulate responses, experiences, and actions, all of which form a causal chain that upon re-tracing and tracing allow us to better understand how a contemporary Hindu community manages to settle into a new neighbourhood. The temples, as objects, thus provide a means to contextualise, through materialised discourses, the temple publics that arise and become visible during the course of a Swaminarayan construction project. I am using the expression "temple publics," in the same sense offered by Reddy and Zavos in their discussion of the ways that contemporary Hindu communities are creatively interacting with public space and thereby contributing to the reshaping of the public sphere (2009: 242).<sup>1</sup> This public sphere is informed, supported, and shaped by existing discourses. And, how these intersect with the temple construction projects and stimulate further chains of narratives are what I shall explore.

**Robbinsville Township, New Jersey, U.S.A.**

The sky was bright blue, the air crisp, and the bare trunks and branches of the trees could be clearly seen in the distance. Into a clearing, where the furrows in the dirt were visible, a white American Ford Ranger truck appeared carrying a fifteen foot long red blimp with cartoon-like white tail fins. Two men tethered the blimp to a specific spot in the clearing and the blimp was raised to what seemed to be a pre-determined height. The same truck then drove off the clearing and began a circumambulation of the external perimeter of the site, driving slowly along local lanes and roadways. From the truck, a young man aimed a video camera above the tree line surrounding the site

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<sup>1</sup> See the special issue of the *International Journal of Hindu Studies* on "temple publics," volume 13, no. 3, 2009.

and methodically filmed the expanse of space above it, capturing at one point a water tower and a high-tension electric tower. On a few occasions, the red blimp did appear in the camera lens but mostly the video recorded a plain winter landscape of bare trees and lots of clear blue sky.

The choreography of filming the space surrounding the clearing was sponsored and performed by the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha [henceforth "BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha" or "BAPS"]. This Hindu devotional community and organisation had purchased the land in order to construct a temple complex of multiple buildings including a central temple with a main dome and flagpole that would reach a maximum height of approximately 108 feet. The video of the blimp from a 360 degree route outside of the clearing was intended to show local and nearby residents that the red blimp, flying at the height of 110 feet was seldom visible even when the trees were without leaves. In a presentation in February 2010 before the community of Robbinsville and its town planning board, BAPS presented its case for why it was requesting a height variance, and photographs of the white truck, red blimp, and still images taken from the video camera were shown. BAPS was awarded its request to construct a central temple with a dome and added flag pole. Since the red blimp, with few exceptions had not been visible from the neighbouring areas, it was decided by the town planning board that the construction of the BAPS temple would not interrupt the "view shed" of local and nearby residents. In other words, in receiving permission for its formal request for a height variance for the tallest feature of its construction project, BAPS could now commence the creation of a central temple that would be largely invisible to the nearby residents unless of course one intentionally entered the temple complex site.

In the context of its Hindu temple building activities in the United States, BAPS finds itself engaging with local and national religious, legal, and cultural expectations that may or may not complement its efforts to support its devotional tradition. The temple publics, composed as it is of people, institutions, and discourses, is one that BAPS must interact with as it builds temples, some out of carved stone, and others from re-purposed buildings, throughout North America.<sup>2</sup> At the level of the local neighbourhood, the temple publics, consisting of residents and the local planning or land zoning boards, must be convinced that BAPS "fits" its conception of neighbour and member of the community. It is in this close geographical and social dimension, delimited to the local site of the proposed structure and including adjacent communities, where we can turn to for sources of discursive material that convey how BAPS's publics are responding to each other.

In this article, I look at the discursive material generated by some segments of the BAPS temple publics that subsequently circulates, and thereby has the potential to further inform the temple publics and even influence BAPS' interaction with the same

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<sup>2</sup> See Kim (2007) for an exploration of the connection between Swaminarayan temple building and Swaminarayan ontological ideals. See Kim (2009) for a specific examination of why temples and their construction are relevant to the BAPS community from the beginning of its origin.

publics.<sup>3</sup> What are the ideas of community, religious space, and Hinduism expressed by BAPS members and non-Swaminarayan local residents after a Swaminarayan temple is already constructed as in the case of the Lilburn, Georgia Swaminarayan temple? What are the terms of the discourse that appear when BAPS appeals to a community where it hopes to construct a temple as in the case of the proposed Robbinsville temple complex? In exploring the discursive record generated by a temple construction project, this article argues that the hyper material presence of the built and yet unbuilt temple allows an analytical entrée for approaching how these sites are conceptualised, imagined, and experienced by devotees and outsiders. Put differently, instead of trying to disentangle the reactions of various temple publics to BAPS and potentially demonising an oppositional community, my emphasis on looking at the discourse generated by the plans to build a Hindu temple draws our attention to the discursive implications of these sites.<sup>4</sup> We can witness how temples, built or unbuilt, “have public lives and enter into ongoing chains of causes and consequences” (Keane 2008: S124). We can focus on the ways that people talk about and respond to the temples arising in their communities and trace how this reception is connected to existing discourses that in turn lead to further imaginings, assessments, and conclusions about BAPS, Hinduism, religion, and community. As it turns out, whether a community would much rather see a church steeple over a Hindu temple spire and flag says much about how people experience objects and the discourses that support their experiencing.

### **The Materiality of Temples**

Webb Keane and others have convincingly argued that the materiality of religious objects provides rich avenues for approaching how these objects are enmeshed in circulating discourses while simultaneously generating new nodes of discourse (2008: S123). The objects, whether present or absent, convey the ways in which their owners, or in the case of BAPS, the temple builders, and their publics respond and how these responses in turn may generate new materialisations (Engelke 2009). We look at two Swaminarayan temples in this article and, building on the analytical scaffolding offered by Keane, the aim is to trace how the sites of Swaminarayan construction are not just indexical of a powerful Hindu devotional community. Rather, as objects that generate public reactions, they are evidence of experiences that are neither entirely hidden in the interiority of the subject nor dissociable from their own temporality (Engelke 2007; Keane 2008). The temple thus provides a tangible and experiential foundation from which to observe and analyse webs of interconnected experiences and their discursive

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<sup>3</sup> I owe much to John Zavos and the steering committee of the international network, “The Public Representation of a Religion called Hinduism,” which between 2008 and 2010 convened eight conferences concerned with the range of ways in which Hindu communities are supporting their practices in changing urban and transnational spaces. My own arguments in this article have developed from my participation in this network. For further information on the network, please see <http://www.arts.manchester.ac.uk/hinduism/>.

<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that BAPS publics are not exclusively constituted of oppositional communities and discourses. Moreover, whether critical or supportive of BAPS activities, the “voices” or discursive content of BAPS’s publics, are necessarily heterogeneous.

expressions. In this sense, what becomes interesting to trace is how those unfamiliar with Hindu traditions, temples, and contemporary Hindu communities, come to experience the idea of, as well as the very real reality, of the Swaminarayan temple in their neighbourhood.

### **Who is the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha?**

More commonly recognised by its acronym, "BAPS," the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha has attracted attention outside of India for its carved stone temples. Consisting of a diaspora of one millions members with the majority residing in Gujarat State in western India, BAPS represents itself as a socio-spiritual and humanitarian organisation with a strong emphasis on teaching values through devotion, volunteerism, and self-disciplinary behaviour. With the expansion of BAPS outside of Gujarat to other parts of India and beyond, BAPS has been successful in transplanting its teachings and practices as well as its organisational hierarchy to new places of settlement. To a significant degree, the construction of temples is an important indicator of the strength of the BAPS organisation, particularly since the monetary and volunteer labour to create a temple, in most instances, comes from its local area members. From the perspective of Swaminarayan devotees, the creation of a temple is a profound sign of devotional commitment to their God, Guru, and organisation.<sup>5</sup> It is also a highly public means to convey and reinforce this devotee-God-Guru relationship. Devotees understand that the temple is the "home" of God; and, through their devotion to their Guru, they are inspired to support temple construction. This activity, while prompted by personal devotional objectives, is nevertheless strengthened through collective and large-scale projects such as temple building. The temples, in other words, while intense sites of devotional activity, are simultaneously edifices that foster a public awareness of the BAPS community.

By 2007, BAPS had constructed four carved stone temples, or *mandirs* in North America, in suburbs outside of Houston, Chicago, Atlanta in the United States, and in Toronto, Canada. These structures have arisen in social and historical landscapes considerably different from India where BAPS has built numerous stone temples over the past one hundred years.<sup>6</sup> The temple building committees based in the U.S. had to become familiar with local and state land ordinances and zoning rules as well as federal U.S. land use laws. This article does not specifically trace BAPS's history of encounters with legal matters as it embarked upon temple construction in the U.S. Instead, BAPS, in trying to obtain the approval of local planning boards, must present its organisation, community and purpose of temple building in ways that consider the informing discourses of their potential new neighbours. What is of particular interest is how the temple publics, while hardly a homogeneous entity, respond to the temple as an object of religious signification that stands in contrast to something else. The temple itself, in

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<sup>5</sup> The BAPS Swaminarayan devotional tradition emphasises specific relationships between God (that is, *Bhagwan Swaminarayan*), Guru, and devotee. See Kim (2007 and 2009). Also, see the extensive BAPS publications available in many of its temple bookstores or through its website, [www.swaminarayan.org](http://www.swaminarayan.org)

<sup>6</sup> For example, there are BAPS temples in Gujarat, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, West Bengal, and New Delhi.

this argument, is the prime object of and generator of discourse but the generated discourse reveals perceptions and interpretations about something beyond the object. BAPS and its leaders recognise that their devotional Hindu tradition is not always easily understood by outsiders; nevertheless, the undeniably concrete presence of the temple, whether completed or not, confirms that whatever Swaminarayan traditions may be, the result is a solid and highly public form that, as Keane writes, are “objects for the senses and not confined to inner or subjective experience” (2008: S114). As a semiotic object, the Swaminarayan temple can “enter into projects that people work on” (Keane 2008: S 115). It is this quality of the temple, notwithstanding its devotional significance to Swaminarayan devotees, of a semiotic form that provokes varieties of responses and experiences that we now consider.

We shall look at two case studies, one set in Georgia and the other in New Jersey.<sup>7</sup> In each instance, it will become evident that the Swaminarayan temple provokes responses from its publics that implicate their informing ideas. These ideas no doubt pre-date the arrival or completion of the temple, but they become further reified in their encounter with the solid materiality of the new edifice in the neighbourhood.

### Case One: A Completed Temple in Lilburn, Georgia

The to-date largest carved stone BAPS temple outside of India was inaugurated on 27 August 2007. Commonly referred to as the “Atlanta” temple owing to its seven mile proximity to this major urban centre in the American southeast, the BAPS temple is actually located in Lilburn, Georgia, a small suburb of just over 11,000 residents (2000 U.S. Census). Unlike some of BAPS’s other temple construction projects, the efforts to secure land and construct the Atlanta temple were supported by local leaders and there was relatively little community opposition. On the day of the *murti pratishtha nagar yatra* when the *murtis* or images to be installed were paraded around the temple area, there was a small protest group with placards that decried the glaring presence of ‘idolatrous’ Hinduism in Christian territory. Notwithstanding the overall lack of public protest, a search of the blogosphere does reveal more critical responses to the Atlanta temple. It is these that I share now for the purpose of understanding an area of discursive content in which BAPS is located.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The research that contributes to this article is part of my ongoing fieldwork with the BAPS community. I am grateful to the many BAPS devotees who have welcomed me into their lives. I particularly thank the leaders and volunteers in the BAPS North American region for making possible my fieldwork in the United States. And, I thank Dipal Patel who facilitated my correspondence with Sadhu Mangalnidhidas. All interpretations and arguments in this article are my own.

<sup>8</sup> It behooves repeating that while the focus of this article is on more negative critical responses to BAPS temples, this does not imply that such responses are the only ones in circulation. The blogosphere in the Atlanta region hosts other perspectives including those that are both critical and positive in their assessments to the Atlanta Swaminarayan temple. See, for example, <http://iwu2012breanna.wordpress.com/2011/03/14/atlanta-day-6-an-intricate-temple/>, a link which Sadhu Mangalnidhidas of BAPS shared with me (through the intermediary assistance of Dipal Patel.).

The following excerpted material is taken from the blogger called "VirusHead" who is also known as Heidi. For an entry dated 4 January 2009, and titled, "Visit to BAPS Hindu Temple," Heidi writes<sup>9</sup>:

When we drove in, there was a small gatehouse. We stopped at the gate, and a man stuck his head out and asked, "What's your name?" John told him his own name. Ben and I were silent. He opened the gate. So, already, things were a little surreal. Why would he ask the name? How did we know that only John's name mattered, or were we wrong about that? Was he checking against some sort of list? Or just making a note of it? Why? ...

For all it cost to build, I think they missed something essential-- or maybe that was somehow the whole point? ...

Everyone was silent-- by decree of the signs-- but that seemed wrong to me. There should have been chanting, bells, singing, dancing! Perhaps it was just because we were there on an off hour-- I don't know. I also missed the smells of incense and candles.

I just couldn't shake the feeling that things were somehow slightly off – it was all too clean and pristine. There were plexiglass shields around the carved columns, when there should have been encouragement to touch them. What kind of temple is this, really? I don't know much of anything about this particular flavor of Hinduism, but there should be a sense of age – and at least a little grime – in a temple...

This temple didn't seem to be about flows and movement and process, but more about a museum-type static series. It's an interesting, even fascinating, monument, but... well, again – we were seeing it at an "off" time. I'll go back and see the differences when the alter[sic] doors are opened.<sup>9</sup>

As described by Heidi on her blog, her visit to the Atlanta Swaminarayan temple was suggested by an extended family member and though the site was nearby to her, she had not known about it. From the moment of her arrival with her immediate family, Heidi's observations convey her wariness about the temple. "Why," she asks, does a temple person ask for the name of the car driver? Once inside the temple, Heidi shares her appreciation of the temple's carvings but it is clear that her perceptions and sensory reactions to this space are undergirded by a comparative bias that she is unable to shake off. The temple is too clean, too quiet, does not have the right aromas, and seems too much like a museum. Interestingly, she notes that the temple is missing "flows, movement, and process." She writes, "What kind of temple is this, really? ... there should be a sense of age – and at least a little grime – in a temple."

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.virushead.net/vhrandom/2009/01/04/visit-to-baps-hindu-temple>, accessed 15 July 2010

Heidi acknowledges that she is unfamiliar with the builders of the temple and yet she characterises the Swaminarayan temple in comparison to something other than what she is experiencing. Though recognising that her visit may have occurred in an “off” time, the temple has reminded Heidi of what she was expecting to experience but did not. Given the costs, which Heidi reproduces via a Wikipedia entry on the “Atlanta” temple, a reported \$19 million dollars, she did assume that the temple would be larger in size and, as she observes in her blog entry, certainly not within visual distance of an ordinary supermarket. The various details that Heidi observes about the temple site suggest that her experiencing of the Swaminarayan temple did not match with her sensory and aesthetic assumptions. Elsewhere her blog alludes to her cross-cultural interest in a variety of topics and her résumé indicates her doctoral degree from an interdisciplinary programme that included a focus on religion and culture. This background presumably provides Heidi with the confidence to produce a blog entry on a temple and community of which she admits she is not familiar. This combination of confident assessment alongside an acknowledged gap in knowledge opens questions about what makes an outsider’s perception about a Hindu temple relevant to understanding the temple publics. Whatever fuels the blogger’s convictions, the location of this blog entry on the internet invites others who may search for “Atlanta Swaminarayan temple” or some variation to enter a narrative that is predicated on personal experience. Heidi’s experience of the Swaminarayan temple has produced a material output that is available for others to respond to. Indeed, one respondent, Vance, notes,

Good commentary on the temple—gave a good feel for the place. My experience with Hindu temples matches yours, they usually have sort of a well-used feel to them—not particularly worried about dirt.<sup>10</sup>

From Heidi, to Vance, and to other respondents both affirming and critical, the chain of assessments become part of the discourse that accumulates and contributes to how the Atlanta Swaminarayan is viewed by its publics. And, while these views can hardly be taken as representative of how many others may experience the temple, their points of congruence and separation point to informing discourses that might be further probed. Are the views of Heidi and Vance, for example, influenced by their assumptions about Hinduism, their notions of religion, and their geographical location or age? Are their views informed by discourses in the United States about India, or even images of India generated by the Indian government’s office of tourism?

Heidi’s blog conveys an attitude of mild bafflement and indecision about what makes the BAPS temple not quite what she had imagined it to be. Since the visit to the temple provoked this comparative stance, the question comes forth as to what is the basis for Heidi’s imaginings in the first place? What underlies the assumption that a Hindu temple must not be too clean lest it not appear to be a *rea*/Hindu temple? What informs the assessment that the temple should have a certain aroma, noise level, and

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.virushead.net/vhrandom/2009/01/04/visit-to-baps-hindu-temple>, accessed 23 November 2011.

movement of bodies? What we might begin to see, from this brief exploration of Heidi's blog, is the power of a sign. We do not really know what Heidi feels about the Swaminarayan temple other than what comes forth from her explication of this site which in turn reveals certain assumptions about Hindu temples. This is a chain of causality that directs our attention to the sign itself, that is, the Hindu temple.

As it turns out, other non-Swaminarayan devotees living in the Lilburn area of the BAPS temple have shared their thoughts on a local community blog associated with the town of Snellville, located only a few miles from Lilburn, Georgia.<sup>11</sup> From Michael, on 23 March 2007:

This is in response to an article that came on local newspapers under the heading "Hindu community prepares to open **Lilburn temple**" To the ignorant Indian guy named *PATEL* who gave interview to the Gwinnett Daily Post saying "**This temple is not like the Christian Church that is open only on Sundays** that is indeed a slap in the face of the millions of Christians from Baptists, Methodists to the Catholics, and I challenge him to go and peek in one of these churches and see for yourself!... Just because you have built a structure sparkling with idols from cows to snakes and birds and reptiles as your number of Gods increase every now and then... As of you who is trying to hide behind this marble structure which was a source to TRANSFER ILLEGAL TAX EVADED DOLLARS INTO THIS **NON PROFIT** organization named BAPS of a Particular CASTE society...from the Indian state of **GUJARAT** who are always raping and stoning Christian missionaries...No matter how sparkling your building is, your body is the kingdom of GOD; No matter how many idols you have polished on the outskirts of the temple from the snakes to the cows,\*\* JESUS IS THE ONLY WAY, THE TRUTH & THE LIFE! WAKE UP AAMERICA, THE FIRST THINGS THEY GONNA DO IS TO BAN STEAKS HOLY COW. [emphases, including asterisks and misspellings, in original]

Also, from the Snellville blog, Tonya writes, on August 24, 2007:

... I was indeed planning to stop by the temple since I live near Hwy 29 when I saw all the rules: **No shoes inside; No shorts**, Blah blah of several others. As for your comment "You can walk into a Hindu temple any time of the day for a blessing." From whom? Blessings from Rats, Cows, Reptiles....and for that kinda blessing we have to take our **shoes off** and meanwhile If I am jogging by, wearing shorts, I can't come because I have to cover my knees. I would gladly go inside a church, Thanks. [emphases in original]

The comments of Michael and Tonya are emphatic in tone and content and unambiguous in their orientation towards a Christian framing of the Hindu temple.

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<sup>11</sup>  
blogs/ajc/snellvilletalk/entries/2007/08/23/ministrys\_close.html,  
accessed 14 March 2009

<http://www.ajc.com/metro/content/shared->

While Tonya appears to have considered an actual visit to the temple, neither Michael nor Tonya appreciate what each interprets to be an idolatrous iconography, one that includes a too-wide variety of animals. Michael notes the “sparkling” and “polished” aspects of the temple but he is clear that these qualities do not mitigate what he perceives to be a simply wrong religion. Tonya reacts to the temple dress code and concludes that she is able to enter a church in jogging clothing and this she would rather do than dress according to the temple standards and receive blessings from an animal source. From Michael and Tonya’s comments, we can discern that their inability to appreciate the Swaminarayan temple is provoked in some substantial way by their preferences, overtly and implicitly for the Christian church. The Swaminarayan temple, from its dress code to its aesthetic dimensions is too alien a space; it is not Christian enough; it is too offensive to be an approachable site. From Michael’s overwrought posting, we can sense too, how the temple is a disruptive spectacle, one that can only point to a less-than-legal or legitimate basis for its construction.

From the three blog postings of Heidi, Michael, and Tonya, we can discern the discursive formation of an American and Protestantised ‘religion’ and its strong framing of these individuals’ reactions to the Lilburn Swaminarayan temple. Their feelings of suspicion to the space and their assumptions about the people who have constructed it point, minimally, to an epistemic foundation that provides a means of indexing their encounter with the Swaminarayan space to their own informing assumptions about religion and its proper form. These observers do not acknowledge the Swaminarayan devotional foundation that has made the temple possible other than, in Michael and Tonya’s postings, to assert the primacy of the Christian church. As for the actual subjectivity of Swaminarayan follower, this is overlooked or perhaps it is not to be permitted.

### **Case Two: A Yet Unbuilt Temple in Robbinsville, New Jersey**

In 2008 and 2010, the BAPS temple building committee and its expert witnesses came before the Robbinsville town planning board.<sup>12</sup> BAPS had purchased 102 acres in the New Jersey township of Robbinsville (pop. 13,642, 2010 U.S. Census). The land was already zoned for religious use and thus BAPS would not have to convince the board members that it intended to use the land for religious purposes. Rather, BAPS was seeking approval, in 2008, for the particular religious structures that it hoped to build. This consisted of a multi-phase and multi-year plan that would produce a temple complex containing a *mandir* (temple), main meeting hall, class room facilities, large kitchen, residences for *sadhus* (monks), and gymnasium. While the Robbinsville planning board would be constrained under the RLUIPA Act (Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act) to prevent the construction of religious buildings on land already zoned for permitted religious purposes, BAPS still needed to prove that its request for multiple buildings would meet the religious use criteria. BAPS received

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<sup>12</sup> In full disclosure, I attended the Robbinsville planning board hearings as an unpaid expert witness on behalf of BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha. My role was to share my understanding of BAPS and the relevance of the BAPS proposed building plans in light of its Hindu devotional tradition.

unanimous planning board approval for the temple complex construction.<sup>13</sup> In 2010, BAPS went again before the Robbinsville planning board to request a height variance for its central structure, now referred to as a *mahamandiram*. This modification in construction plans necessitated hearings in which BAPS attempted to clarify the differences between *mandir* and *mahamandiram* and in doing so, also support its request to have the tallest point of the *mahamandiram* reach 108 feet. In its arguments, BAPS argued that the proposed *mahamandiram* would be very similar to a carved-stone temple with a few ritual exceptions. Through a series of expert witness reports, BAPS explained that the architectural guidelines for building a *mahamandiram* were entirely dependent on the temple building prescriptions specified in ancient texts known as *Sthapatya shastra*. The expert witnesses specified that the appearance, dimensions, and significantly the height of the proposed structure are dependent on the height of the *murtis*, or images, which would be installed. In requesting a height variance, BAPS made clear that this was not a random height but one predicated on mathematical calculations established in ancient texts.

The Robbinsville Township ordinance specifies that religious buildings are permitted a height of 45 feet, and that certain "accessory structures" meeting specific criteria would be permitted, allowing a building to have a maximum height of 55 feet. For accessory structures, the ordinance specifies that such must be unoccupied and made of non-combustible material. An accessory structure must serve the 'principle use structure' in function; it must be an integral part of the principal use structure; and, it must be subordinate in square feet to that of the main use structure (Robbinsville 2010a: 87). Permitted accessory structures are listed as unoccupied domes and flagpoles. As for steeples, there is no height restriction. The consultant hired by BAPS to explain the overall temple complex and *mahamandiram* construction plans to the Robbinsville planning board noted, "Steeples, of course, are significant in other religions. The ordinance does restrict, however, the height of unoccupied domes and flag poles" (Robbinsville, 2010a: 89-90). The consultant pointed out that for BAPS, the domes and flag pole are effectively the "steeple" for the *mahamandiram*.

The entire roof structure above that 33-foot elevation is unoccupied space, and it consists of a combination of domes, spires and flag poles. And that all affectively[sic] is a steeple. Steeple, by definition, does not have a minimum percentage or maximum percentage of roof area. Steeple's essentially a decorative or monument-type structure that's typically pointed and extending up and usually is typically a spire. And that is what is occurring here at the *Mahamandiram*. I would have actually taken the position that this was a steeple and we didn't need a variance at all. Except that the ordinance does specifically address unoccupied domes and flag poles (Robbinsville 2010b: 116-117).

The BAPS initiated discussion about the proposed height variance for its main temple structure did raise a number of intriguing puzzles: why is there no Robbinsville height

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<sup>13</sup> See Kim (Forthcoming) for a discussion about the 2008 Robbinsville hearings.

restriction for a steeple though there is an ordinance height restriction for a religious building? And, if making a parallel between a church and Hindu temple, and if assuming that the latter is a religious structure, then could the unoccupied church steeple and the unoccupied dome and flag pole of the Hindu temple be seen as equivalent? More sensibly and more effectively, rather than parse the significance of the spire viz. the dome and flag pole, BAPS and its consultants conducted the “visual impact study” described at the beginning of this article. This study, involving the red blimp that was flown at an approximate height of 110 feet, succeeded in demonstrating that whether or not local townspeople accepted the “religious” functional equivalent of dome, spire, and flag pole to steeple, there were two already existing structures connected to the BAPS Robbinsville property that stood even taller. These two structures, namely a water tower (124 feet) adjacent to the BAPS property and a high-tension electric tower (128 feet) located directly on the BAPS property were much higher than the proposed height of the *mahamandiram* (108 feet) and far more visible from a distance beyond the property. The video footage of the blimp taken from the circumference of the BAPS property revealed that the blimp, flying at 110 feet was invisible 95% of the time and only partially visible in a few points around the property. This might raise the question of what structure would be more appealing to glimpse, a water tower, electric tower, or a carved stone dome with flag pole?

The matter of the BAPS temple project and its visibility was indeed a serious one for some residents of Robbinsville, the village of Windsor, and East Windsor.<sup>14</sup> During the planning board hearings between the Robbinsville planning board and the BAPS temple project team, the public was invited to express thoughts on the proposed land use and subsequent height variance request. As members of the audience stood before the planning board during the public segment, each was asked to state his or her name and address. From this, it became clear that many in the audience were actually residents of Windsor, a village within Robbinsville. These members of BAPS’s publics, in this instance of encounter, were those who were mostly critical of the proposed temple complex and requested height of the main structure. The Windsor criticisms, in particular, were mainly framed in terms of the unwanted transformations that the temple complex would allegedly bring to a historic village. Cathy Lubbe, who stated her place of residence as “Village of Windsor,” pleaded,

The village was placed on the National Register because it has maintained the same size for 150 years. You cannot tell me that this [BAPS proposal] is not going to create a problem with the village (Robbinsville 2010a: 128).

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<sup>14</sup> The present-day areas of Robbinsville, Windsor, and East Windsor in the state of New Jersey (U.S.) share a long history dating to the 18<sup>th</sup> century and including shifts in borders and various name changes. Some members of the public in the Robbinsville Township hearings described in this article are residents of Windsor, a “village” within Robbinsville and others may be from East Windsor, an adjacent town where BAPS had purchased land for building a temple. This latter plan was not approved by the local planning board. In this article, to avoid the error of determining whether a public member is a resident of Windsor or East Windsor, I have opted to use “Windsor” alone. I thank Dipal Patel for pointing out the territorial distinctions of the two Windsors to me.

Another Windsor resident, Eric Feigenbaum said,

I moved into Windsor about three years ago, and I moved here for the rural characteristics of the town, the history of the Village...if you want to think about the town as historical, you wouldn't see these things back then...(Robbinsville 2010a: 135-136).

BAPS and its consultants were more than prepared for concerns about altered landscapes. As demonstrated by the red blimp visual impact study, BAPS had already planned for the possibility of contention over its height variance request and had undertaken the blimp test well before the commencement of the February 2010 planning board hearings. This "balloon test" was intended to prove that the Swaminarayan complex and its tallest structure would not disrupt the Windsor or Robbinsville "view shed" or sightline of those areas adjacent to the BAPS property. BAPS also produced a signed acknowledgement from a New Jersey Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer who noted that the proposed construction would not endanger the national and state historic district and that no "historic properties" would be affected by the proposed BAPS temple project.<sup>15</sup> Yet, neither the blimp test nor repeated demonstrations that the temple complex would not disrupt the existing way of life for Robbinsville and Windsor residents appeared to satisfy some of the assembled publics. At least one member of the public asserted that BAPS was lying to the planning board and assembled public.<sup>16</sup>

The efforts by BAPS and its consultants to elide the temple dome and flag pole with a steeple might suggest an effort to minimise the distinctiveness of temple architecture in favour of something more familiar to its audience while at the same time supporting the idea that steeples, domes, and flag poles are part of religious structures more generally. That Hindu temples have domes, spires, and flag poles are, in other words, no different from churches that have steeples. In this framing of architectural accessories, the subtext is that different material expressions of different religions nevertheless point to the universal dimensions of religion, at least in an architectural sense. As for the balloon study, this effort by BAPS to demonstrate its sensitivity to the uneasiness of its neighbours' perceptions about a Hindu temple complex suggests BAPS's willingness to prove that its dome and flag pole would be all but invisible. We can begin to see here that unintentionally or otherwise, BAPS's careful plan to help its publics appreciate its proposed temple project has resulted in two seemingly contradictory objectives: the dome and flag pole are presented as materially synonymous with the steeple; and, the publics living in the vicinity of the yet unbuilt temple complex are to be assured that they will barely see the tallest structure in the

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<sup>15</sup> This document was shown by BAPS during its Power Point presentation on 17 February 2010. It was signed by Department State Historic Preservation Officer, Daniel D. Saunders, dated 11 February 2010.

<sup>16</sup> This accusation was strongly criticised by a Robbinsville planning board member. He apologised to BAPS and its consultants on behalf of the board and excoriated unnamed members of the public for intimating that BAPS was unethical in its presentation methods and data analysis. See the comments of David Boyne (Robbinsville 2010b: 5-6).

complex. There is, thus, in BAPS's representation of itself to its publics, both a reassurance that BAPS Hinduism is not different from other religions in terms of architectural need; and, for those unable to or unwilling to appreciate the Hindu temple complex, there would be little visible evidence of its presence.

### **Consuming Materiality and its Consequences**

The BAPS temple project committee recognised that it needed to find a vocabulary that would translate the material dimensions of its proposed temple complex into an accessible religious object. However, as became clear in different moments of BAPS's Robbinsville presentations, its temple complex project was also protected under U.S. federal law. As the lead attorney for BAPS pointed out,

The municipality can't discriminate between what's accepted for one religious denomination and prohibited for another. There must be a compelling government interest to deny a variance which is of critical importance to a religious institution (Robbinsville 2010a: 7-8).

BAPS effectively needed to demonstrate that its temple project was thus as motivated by its leaders' devotional reasons to build a complex as it was to satisfy the existing assumptions of the category "religion". During the concluding portion of the second February 2010 hearing, BAPS observed that its request for a height variance was, in the final analysis, a matter of terminology more than an intent to challenge Robbinsville's zoning ordinance. At the conclusion of the hearing on 24 February 2010, the Robbinsville planning board, with one dissenting member, accepted BAPS's application for a height variance. As one board member noted, just before the final vote was taken,

I just would like to say that I have gotten a tremendous education here...it's a very impressive religion, and it's things I've never known. And I appreciate the enlightenment...everything I've seen and heard, you know, through the testimony, with the pictures, you know, it's a slight visual impact. Obviously you know, it's going to be a gorgeous structure. It's not a nuclear reactor... (Robbinsville 2010b: 117-119).

Nearly two years following the Robbinsville approval for the height variance, blog respondent John writes,

I live on Hankins Rd. It is the worst. Property values are going to plunge to the gutter.. I called the local Real Estate agent to appraise my beautiful home, and she said Hankins Rd is not an upcoming area where people want to live bc of the temple coming up. I am getting 100,000 less than what I should be getting, but her advise is to sell before the temple goes up.. bc after the temple goes up the traffic is going to be crazy. and value of properties are going down.. so my advice to my fellow Hankins Rd neighbors... sell your houses.. or ure gonna

smell cury everyday you wake up.. and these people are dirty they walk on ur property they don't care.. they liter.. I went to the site and some indian refered me to the edison temple.. they destoryed the area... SO BYE BYE ROBBINSVILLE!![emphases, spelling, and spacing in original]<sup>17</sup>

This posting illustrates how the Swaminarayan temple, no matter the success of its presentations before a local planning board, is situated in a limitless field of individual responses that can circulate and perhaps stimulate further responses. And, yet, the responses are not entirely random or unexpected. To trace a very real concern of many homeowners, even before its construction, the temple's anticipated existence spurs emotions that may have an effect on how local citizens as well as potential newcomers interpret property values. It is not the temple that causes house prices to tumble but rather people's perceptions and assumptions about the temple that in turn influence their thoughts about living in Robbinsville. This chain of events, as catalysed by the unbuilt Swaminarayan temple, can have measurable material effects, not only to worried or disgruntled home-owners but to others who, for example, might stumble upon the mostly hostile pronouncements in the Robbinsville blog, and then decide not to settle in this local region. As Matthew Engelke argued for a very different ethnographic context, it is not merely the presence but the absence of something material that can engender responses and subsequent materialities (2007).

The Swaminarayan temple, whether built or not, or visible or invisible, has the capacity to shape behaviours not only of its devotees but a larger pool of people who constitute its temple publics. What we can discern from our brief view of the Lilburn, Georgia and Robbinsville, New Jersey cases are the ways in which the temple sites trigger particular reactions which then become nodes for further responses. This web of triggered responses becomes itself a necessary arena for analysis. The cases discussed here suggest that the category religion plays a significant role in the reactions of the temple publics. The Lilburn and Robbinsville area residents, though reacting to the Swaminarayan temple in different ways, nevertheless convey an anxiety about BAPS that appears to reside in their conception of acceptable religion(s) and of what this religion is constituted. Religion, it seems, is the common semiotic form that underlies the temple publics' experiencing of the temple. For example, why must BAPS both try to appear as a recognisable religion and yet make efforts to render some aspects of its material expression invisible? To answer this is to recognise what some of the residents of Windsor, New Jersey and the blog respondents from Snellville, Georgia felt, namely, that BAPS is an unfamiliar religion with architecture, practices, and large resources that do not complement the social and religious landscape of local villages in New Jersey and Georgia. The deep anxieties and hostilities in some of the local residents, as described above, suggest that further ethnographic research is necessary to fine-tune the connections between religion as an informing discourse and a strong contender for influencing a publics' responses to the new temple in the

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.topix.com/forum/city/robbinsville-nj/T9L5AH9O61F02P8CN>, accessed 25 November 2011.

neighbourhood.<sup>18</sup> The semiotic richness of the category religion and its privileged place as an historical form are confirmed by BAPS's recognition that it must place emphasis on the religious character of its temple project. It should be noted that this strategy, in contrast, is not one that necessarily arises when BAPS is seeking permission to build temples in India.

Finally, to consider, how do the responses, perceptions, and behaviours of temple publics become the force for material changes in Hindu communities? And, do these changes offer new ways of looking at India, the Indian diaspora, and the making of global Hinduism? By navigating the discursive field of "religion" the BAPS temple committee's actions highlight the challenges of creating understanding from misunderstanding about Hindu religious communities. The cultural translations of ideas and practices, imaginings, and ideals are, as Tulasi Srinivas has recently argued a process dependent on both the transmitting and receiving sides (2010). Global Hinduism, not surprisingly, is the product of multiple factors, including an increasingly established diaspora population, particularly in North America, and the strikingly easy flow of ideas, objects, and practices from here to there. Robbinsville and Windsor residents, for example, looked up BAPS on the internet and discovered that hundreds of thousands of people visit BAPS temple complexes in India. This fact certainly made an impression and added to the anxiety of the BAPS proposed temple complex. In the diaspora of South Asians, global Hinduism is the product of engagement and interrogation by people whose conceptions of Hinduism are inevitably affected by the discourses on religion and whose efforts to accommodate or contest these discourses result in novel ways of sustaining a livable Hinduism beyond India. That the processes of "cultural translation" are often perceived to be faulty and inadequate to one party or another is not surprising. Srinivas argues that when ideas and things travel, the multiple and usually less-than-obvious ways in which they interact with already existing and about-to-be created discourses makes translation a process that is unpredictable. As BAPS and other minority religious communities encounter already established discursive contexts, it is those communities that are able to address competing and antagonistic discourses and to find ways to map these onto their own understandings of their traditions that will likely thrive. Towards this end, the language games that connect steeples to domes, spires, and flag poles are well worth playing.

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<sup>18</sup> The support of nearly all members (minus one) of the Robbinsville Township planning board for the BAPS request for height variance points to the variations in the BAPS publics' receptivity towards an unfamiliar edifice, religious tradition, and community. Clearly, not all members of the Robbinsville publics feel hostile towards BAPS.

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# Backdoor Hinduism: A Recoding In The Language Of Spirituality

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## Abstract

At the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions, Swami Vivekananda spoke as a member of the Hindu delegation and famously declared, "I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true."<sup>1</sup> But contemporary transnational gurus who have followed in his wake appear to be much less proud to belong to any one religion. Instead, many rely on the more universalistic language of "spirituality" as the cornerstone of their global messages and diminish their self-identification with the term "religion" in their discourses. This article analyzes the discourses and practices of one such transnational guru figure, Amritanandamayi Ma, (b. 1953 aka "Amma" meaning "mother"). Herein I argue that like many of her contemporaries, Amma uses the language of spirituality to appeal to global audiences despite the fact that her practices are distinctly Hindu.

In defining the boundaries of the notoriously difficult signifier of "Hinduism," Gavin Flood suggests that we might consider it through prototype theory (developed by George Lakoff), which states that categories do not have rigid boundaries, but there are degrees of category membership, meaning with respect to this case that some members are more prototypically Hindu than others.<sup>2</sup> Of course, the question then is who decides what is "prototypically" Hindu, that which is central to the category? In response, Flood suggests that "we must turn, on the one hand to Hindu self-understandings, for Hinduism has developed its own self-description, as well as, on the other, to the scholar's understandings of common features or structuring principles seen from outside the tradition."<sup>3</sup> But what of this case in which Hindu religiosity is recoded to global audiences as spirituality? Should scholars follow this self-description or is there a responsibility here to discuss the ramifications of this radical reformulation? I situate this article at this impasse, wherein Amma and her devotees represent themselves with the discursive rhetoric of spirituality, when from this scholar's perspective their discourses and practices appear to be quite Hindu. My project then is not only to reveal the Hindu underpinnings to their discourses on spirituality, but also to question the perceived necessity for this type of recoding. In essence, if Amma enacts and promotes Hindu practices, emphasizes Hindu devotional attitudes, and promotes the worship of

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<sup>1</sup> Swami Vivekananda, "Response to Welcome," World's Parliament of Religions, 11<sup>th</sup> September 1893.

<sup>2</sup> Flood, 7.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Hindu deities (among others), then why doesn't she represent her movement to global audiences within the meta-category of Hinduism?

Instead, Amma simultaneously recodes the categories of Hinduism and religion as a non-denominational spirituality. She creates her vision of spirituality by drawing on the universalistic monism of Advaita Vedantic [Hindu] discourses and an offering an inclusivistic and expansive interpretation of Hinduism recoded as *sanātana dharma*. But with regard to her systematized orthopraxy, she performs and subsidizes rituals, practices, and administrative hierarchies that are undeniably Hindu in form. I juxtapose Amma's discourses with ethnographic data from her devotees in order to question precisely what is at stake in her somewhat commonplace move to promote discourses of spirituality instead of religion, Hindu religiosity, or Hinduism in her global transnational guru movement.

For many gurus, the active distancing from the Hindu religiosity of their roots develops in tandem with their rise to global fame. As Tulasi Srinivas tells us, "No longer rooted in traditional Hinduism, the new sacred person of Sai Baba is disembedded from the religiocultural milieu and is free to travel across the global network."<sup>4</sup> But do global guru movements perceive this distancing from "traditional Hinduism" as a necessary correlation to becoming globally marketable? Does this signify that Western audiences (and even modern Indian ones) are unprepared to accept Hinduism with its plurality of particular and localized formations and even suggest a continued prejudice against Hindus and Hinduism as many staunch Hindu advocates would have us believe? Or has the historical legacy of the extraction of a generalized ecumenical universalism, often based in derivative forms of Advaita Vedantic philosophy, become so ingrained that it constitutes an independent religious category, nearly complete in its dissociation from its broader religious context of Hinduism?

Turning our gaze toward the pragmatic, one might argue that this ambivalence toward the category of the "Hindu" stems from discomfort with the fact that the term "Hindu" can readily be defined as a religio-ethnic category and one bound to a particular sacred geography: India. Thus, when attempting to reach geographically exogenous non-Indian Hindu audiences, [Hindu] gurus must at least deal with the potential for, if not the prior existence of, categorical dissonance among their followers. They must pre-empt the possibility that potential non-Indian Hindu recruits will question, "how can I follow this [Hindu] guru, if Hindu religiosity is a religio-cultural birthright available only to ethnically Indian Hindus?"

Or to speak in the stark terms of materialism, might it simply be the fact that the language of spirituality is *en vogue* and thus translates more effectively to global audiences, both among practitioners who identify with non-Hindu religious

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<sup>4</sup> Srinivas, 91.

denominations and by the increasing populations of those who have become disillusioned by mainline Christian traditions.

The active distancing of largely Hindu ideologies, practices, discourses and so on from the category of Hindu religion engenders the often virulent contemporary debates in which Indian Hindu activists attempt to reclaim contemporary modalities (such as yoga) as Hindu, while many of their practitioners staunchly defend their spiritual (non-Hindu) foundations. (Vitello 2010) Recently, the head of the Hindu American Foundation touched on the commonplace marketing of Hinduism as spirituality, when he explained, "our issue is that yoga has thrived, but Hinduism has lost control of the brand."<sup>5</sup> Like yoga, Advaita Vedantic theology has been branded globally as "spirituality" by religious leaders who locate their roots in India and draw heavily from Hindu religiosity. But also like yoga, this particular strain of Hindu theology, often termed neo-Vedanta, has been adapted and transformed, sometimes to the point of non-recognition in order to make it palatable to diverse (both intra-Hindu and inter-religious) audiences. The rhetorical history of transnational gurus in the West shows us that the majority of them have chosen to implement generalized universalistic principles usually derived from Advaita Vedanta and couched in the language of spirituality, but dissociated from the greater context of Hinduism in order to garner popular acceptance of their "foreign" religiosity.

Regardless of the multiplicity of motivations behind this disassociation from the category of the Hindu, there are serious and perhaps unexpected consequences. When modern proponents of Hindu-derived practices and theologies argue that their innovations are spiritual rather than religious, or more specifically, Hindu, they effectively relegate the category of the Hindu to that which is traditional, stagnant, ritualistic, and so on and in the process they siphon off its potential for innovation and renewal in modernity. This categorical distancing echoes that of many of the participants in new [Hindu] religious movements, who also seek to detach themselves from "traditional" Hindu religiosity, believing it to be a signifier of backwards, ritualistic, hierarchical, and anti-modern sensibilities. In so doing, both parties stymie the process of Hindu religiosity's adaptations to "multiple modernities," (Appadurai, 1996, Eisenstadt 2000, Tambiah 2000) which ultimately results in the antiquation and fixity of our understanding of what it means to be Hindu. This active process of siphoning results in the fact that youth searching for a Hindu identity are more often than not restricted to conservative and orthodox options because the innovative and liberalistic options have been recoded as spirituality. Thus, we might imagine that the language of spirituality may unwittingly contribute to the active rise in Hindutva ideologies, which are of particular concern in diaspora contexts where the desire to represent an authentically Hindu identity is palpable.

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<sup>5</sup> See Vitello, "Hindu Group Stirs Debate in Fight for the Soul of Yoga."

Scholars, for their part, have largely reflected this distinction rather than challenging it. In attempting to describe and define the products of this disassociation from "traditional" Hinduism they somewhat uncomfortably innovate new terminologies to evocate the Hindu-like activities of many avenues of global Hindu religiosity, e.g. Hindu-derived or Hindu spirituality. (Huffer 2010, Sharma 2006) In his recent work, *American Veda*, Philip Goldberg differentiates the modernist form of "Vedanta-Yoga" as "India's leading export," while George D. Chryssides analyzes "Hindu NRMs [New Religious Movements]" and rightly notes the absence of "distinctively Indian village practices...that are less palatable to westerners."<sup>6</sup> Lola Williamson recently went so far as to champion an entirely new category of [Hindu] religiosity, developing the term Hindu-Inspired Meditation Movements (HIMM) to denote the dual influences of ethnic-Hindus and theologically kaleidoscopic non-Indian Hindu spiritual seekers who comprise devotee populations. She argues that HIMMs are a new religion consisting of the hybridized influences of Hindu religiosity and "Western traditions of individualism and rationalism."<sup>7</sup> Noting the dissimilarity to what we might precariously term "traditional" Hindu religiosity, some scholars have opted for the disavowal of the term "Hindu" entirely, instead locating contemporary [Hindu] hybridity within the realm of "Indic" religiosity (Srinivas 2010) or "modernist" approaches as opposed to Hindu "traditionalism." (Warrier 2006)

Joanne Punzo Waghorne has recently suggested that a tripartite stratum of globalized Hinduism exists in the United States, which is comprised of: "1) the 'liberal' mode of Hindu heritage citizen identifying with the generalized system of pluralism as 'Hindus' in a multi-religious domain, 2) the 'conservative' mode of heritage Hindus identifying their Hinduness (Hindutva) with an ethnic identity derived from India as the motherland, [and] 3) the 'spiritual' mode of Hindu consciousness and yogic practices as open to worldwide participation usually via a guru and guru-centered communities."<sup>8</sup> This article investigates this third 'spiritual' mode in the globalization of Hinduism, but questions the extent to which those who participate in this modality identify themselves with the meta-category of Hinduism. I argue that the global guru movements to which she refers operate in tension with the religious category of the Hindu. Instead of the meta-category of global Hinduism subsuming the 'spiritual' of global guru movements, in fact, the diffusive rhetoric of 'spirituality' attempts to permeate beyond the classifications of religion in general and that of Hinduism in particular.

## On Universalism

But how do we get from the language of Hindu "religion" to that of "spirituality"? Ironically, one of the most effective theological resources that many of these [Hindu] new religious movements employ to obfuscate the category of the Hindu stems from within Hindu religiosity itself, in the form of neo-Vedantic universalism. Contemporary

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<sup>6</sup> Chryssides, 203.

<sup>7</sup> Williamson, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Waghorne, "Global Gurus," 129.

gurus have popularized hallmark Vedic maxims of universalism and ecumenicalism, such as “*ekam sat viprāḥ bahudhā vadanti*” or “Truth is one, the wise call it by many names” (Rg Veda, 1.64.46) and famous Upaniṣadic maxims, such as “*tat tvam asi*: Thou art That,” or “*ayam ātma brahma*: This Self is Brahman.” These textual citations are used to evidence several fundamental claims: first, the essential unity of all living creatures and God (conceived as both immanent and transcendent), which one must realize by pulling aside the curtain of *māyā* (illusion); second, the realization of this ultimate reality is *mokṣa* (liberation) attained through personal development by means of spiritual practice and discipline, and thirdly, the viability of a variety of means and methods to accessing that essential Truth.<sup>9</sup> Historically, the systematized philosophical school of Advaita Vedanta can be traced to Shankara’s 7<sup>th</sup> century commentary on the *Brahma Sūtras (Vedanta Sūtras)*, but contemporary gurus often anachronistically attribute its roots to the Upaniṣads and the *Bhagavad Gītā*, both of which exhibit proto-Advaita Vedantic sensibilities. Many modern proponents, like Aiya, the temple priest/guru in Corinne Dempsey’s ethnographic account of a goddess temple in upstate New York, explain neo-Vedantic sensibilities with the metaphor that like there are many rivers flowing into oceans with a variety of names, still all of these ultimately converge in the same body of water; so too is the nature of the world’s religions eventually leading to one ultimate Truth.<sup>10</sup> This modernist interpretation of Advaita Vedanta provides the foundation for a universalistic idiom that subsumes the multiplicity of difference into a singular conception of cosmic unity. It also resonates among Americans, many of whom easily elide it with Unitarianism, pantheism, and the traces of New Thought and Theosophy that continue to exert their influence in what Catherine Albanese terms American “metaphysical religion.”<sup>11</sup>

Universalizing discourses present general normative claims that aim to speak to and represent all of humanity while camouflaging the fact that they are extracted from particular and particularizing ideologies. Characterized by the obfuscation of difference and particularity, universalizing discourses exert systemic violence upon differences between a multiplicity of religious expressions, which is often overlooked in favor of their unifying tendencies. The European universalisms of Enlightenment reason and rationality fueled the colonial endeavors of empire building directed at asserting Western hegemony across the globe. Proponents of Islamic universalism attempt to construct a pan-Islamic *ummah* that claims to represent and fulfill the social and religious needs of all of humanity. Hindu universalisms, in turn, also derive from the obfuscation of real differences between religious sects, people, and cultures. In their claims to universality, proponents not only minimize the importance of the particularities of subjects’ self-identities, but they claim to represent those particularities by supplanting them with generalizing principles. In each of these cultural traditions, universality becomes a criterion and a site of conflict of who (and which universalist

<sup>9</sup> Philip Goldberg supplies a similar list of seven “core Vedantic principles that we in the West have adapted.” Goldberg, 10-11.

<sup>10</sup> Dempsey, 186.

<sup>11</sup> See Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*.

ideology) is best equipped to represent humanity. Thus, as Étienne Balibar suggests, in speaking of universalism, we instead must speak of multiple universalisms, and recognize these claims as contested spaces constructed by political motivations.<sup>12</sup>

By focusing their attentions on universalisms, such as “One God/many paths,” it might appear that contemporary gurus aim to parallel explicitly the universalisms of the Christian tradition, perhaps supposing that these maxims will ring familiar for audiences outside of India, many of whom have relations to Christian traditions. In these pithy maxims, they may find echoes of the Pauline demonstration of “the subsumption of the Other by the Same...how a universal thought, proceeding on the basis of the worldly proliferation of alterities (the Jew, the Greek, women, men, slaves, free men, and so on) *produces* a Sameness and an Equality (there is no longer either Jew, or Greek, and so on).”<sup>13</sup> In Paul’s preaching, differences and particularities exist in the world, but they are not granted the subjectivity of truth; they must be transcended through faith, hope, and love to reach God. In Alain Badiou’s summation, “[T]hese fictitious beings, these opinions, customs, differences, are that to which universality is addressed; that toward which love is directed; finally, that which must be traversed in order for universality itself to be constructed, or for the genericity (*généricité*) of the true to be imminently deployed.”<sup>14</sup> Similarly, in Advaita Vedantic universalism worldly alterities are imagined as fictitious; they are illusions (*māyā*) that must be recognized as such, dissolved into monism in order to recognize the ultimate sameness and equality of all phenomena. In the universalism of the Advaita Vedantic lens, there is only monism (*sarvo brahman*: everything is Brahman); the existence of actual difference (and hence multiplicity) itself is denied. To use categories often deployed to translate Indic philosophical concepts, *ultimate* difference is revealed to be only *conventional* difference. The nondual monism of neo-Vedanta cannot accept a plurality of opinions, tastes, creeds, prophets, or Gods without undermining its own philosophical foundations.

### Spiritual but not Religious

Many contemporary gurus use the unifying language of spirituality because it enables them to speak in a language that resonates with disparate and diverse audiences. Their contemporary eclectic and disunified audiences demand a transidiomatic theolinguistic register that Srinivas Aravamudan terms “Guru English,” a cosmopolitan method of communication that aims to appeal to populations (and audiences) stemming from a variety of religio-cultural backgrounds.<sup>15</sup> The transidiomatic theolinguistic register of Advaita Vedantic philosophy enables culturally embedded spokespeople to transgress the particularities of Hindu religiosity in order to speak to global audiences in terms of generalized ethics, morality, and humanism. It is a product of the cultural encounter between India and the “West,” which aims to translate and evangelize Hindu ideology by cloaking its particularities in universalistic

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<sup>12</sup> Balibar, 146-74.

<sup>13</sup> Badiou, 109.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>15</sup> See Aravamudan, *Guru English*.

rhetoric. It is perhaps no surprise then that the upswell of this new brand of neo-Vedantic universalism marks its beginnings at the fomenting moments of the Hindu Renaissance of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and similarly emerges from the cultural apologetics of the elite literati (largely Bengali) within the dialectical legacies of colonialism and orientalism.

This type of register is also vital for devotees, many of whom find the generalist and unifying language of spirituality to be an effective tonic of similitude as globalization has rapidly increased the abutment of a variety of radical differences through cultural diffusion, intercultural encounters, and a cosmopolitan panoply in the marketplace of religious ideas. Additionally, it also appeals to those who have disassociated from the particularities of a sectarian religious tradition and seek eclectic and alternative religiosities based in the unmediated pursuit of personal experiences of the supernatural. In fact, while spirituality is a notoriously nebulous term to define (Courtney Bender aptly describes the study of spirituality as “shoveling fog”),<sup>16</sup> there is something definitive within its focus on unmediated and internal experience of transcendence dissociated from any particular form of divinity, which distinguishes it from the category of religion. Robert Wuthnow defines spirituality as “a state of being related to a divine, supernatural, or transcendent order of reality or, alternatively, as a sense or awareness of a suprareality that goes beyond life as ordinarily experienced.”<sup>17</sup> Martin Riesebrodt rightly notes that “the now widespread notion of ‘spirituality’ continues the individualistic orientation of Romantic discourse.”<sup>18</sup> In fact, the modern definition of *spirituality* closely resembles the romanticism inherent in the highly interior and ecumenical terms with which William James famously defined *religion* as “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, the modern discourses of spirituality direct us toward the internal rather than the external; the term spirituality signifies the individual’s personalized quest for an unmediated experience of the transcendent.

In the United States, the accelerating trend toward supplanting (or supplementing) Christian church membership with self-defined alternative and eclectic spiritualities has supplemented the entrée of the new religious category “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR), which, as Philip Goldberg argues, has developed an entire discursive register, a “*lingua spiritus*” among those who hybridize and adapt Asian religions for Western audiences and their followers.<sup>20</sup> In fact, in surveys conducted between 1999 and 2002 in the United States, persons claiming this categorical status

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<sup>16</sup> Bender, 182.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Wuthnow, “Spirituality and Spiritual Practice,” *The Blackwell Companion to Sociology of Religion*, 307.

<sup>18</sup> Riesebrodt, 3.

<sup>19</sup> James, 31.

<sup>20</sup> Goldberg, 344.

ranged from sixteen to thirty-nine percent of the American population.<sup>21</sup> Many who replace the term religion with spirituality aim to avoid the negative valences of that which is often associated with religion. As Robert C. Fuller tells us, "The word *spiritual* gradually became associated with the private realm of thought and experience while the word *religious* came to be connected with the public realm of membership in religious institutions, participation in formal rituals, and adherence to official denominational doctrines."<sup>22</sup> This increased emphasis on the privatization of religion reconfigured as spirituality (and the corresponding promotion of personal spiritual experience) might be read productively as a pragmatic socio-cultural remedy to the potential for conflict and divisiveness, which many see as the inevitable consequence of the direct proximity and immediate accessibility of multiple religions interacting in the public sphere augmented by the increased mobility inherent to globalization. (Luckmann 1967, Bellah 1985, Wuthnow 2003)

Similarly, contemporary Hindu religious spokespersons, many of whose ideological lineages can be traced to the neo-Vedantic universalisms of the eighteenth century religious reformer Rammohan Roy and his Hindu-Unitarian society of the Brahma Samaj, relate the term religion to a bounded set of doctrines substantiated by authorities and institutions who assert their exclusivist worldviews. In their views, the term religion emphasizes obligatory ritual actions to appease a transcendent God, whereas the term spirituality notions toward the inner transformation of the individual in order to foment the recognition of the imminent God within. In 1893, at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago, Pratap Chandra Mazumdar, representing the Brahma Samaj, similarly attached importance to "faith," "intuition," and "spiritual" experiences as opposed to doctrinal "religion." Speaking of the mission of the Brahma Samaj, he explained, "It [Dogmatism] is the lifeless mass of complex theology, inherited by tradition, enforced by external authority, unrealized by spiritual experience, contradicted repeatedly by the spirit of the times and the ascertained laws of things, that the Brahma Samāj repudiates...The great and really profound doctrines of religion are...deposited within the mind in imperceptible accretions by the deep flow of spiritual impulses."<sup>23</sup> He envisioned a spiritual life as one comprised of intimate experiences of transcendence cultivated with the aid of devotions to and guidance from prophets. Mazumdar's dichotomy between dogma and spiritual experience created a Hindu-derived prototype for the contemporary distinction between religion and spirituality.

The ecumenical and universalistic neo-Vedantic ideas of the Brahma Samaj, which fascinated American Unitarians as early as Rammohan Roy's articles in the *Christian Register*, profoundly influenced the tendency of contemporary transnational gurus to supplant Hindu religiosity with Advaita Vedantic universalistic spirituality. Despite his swell of pride with which I began this essay, Swami Vivekananda (and many

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>22</sup> Fuller, 5, though Courney Bender makes a convincing argument that contemporary spirituality is produced in multiple social institutions in *The New Metaphysicals*, 182.

<sup>23</sup> *Leaders of the Brahma Samaj*, 160.

of his contemporaries and subsequent gurus) made “a conscious decision to emphasize a universal, adaptable Vedanta-Yoga, and to keep aspects of Hinduism that might be construed as cultist or idolatrous in the background, as a family might put exotic décor in a closet when conservative guests come over.”<sup>24</sup> Nearly thirty years later, Paramahansa Yogananda (founder of the Self-Realization Fellowship) also argued that, “If by religion we understand only practices, particular tenets, dogmas, customs, and conventions, then there may be grounds for the existence of so many religions. But if religion means primarily God-consciousness, or the realization of God both within and without, and secondarily a body of beliefs, tenets, and dogmas, then, strictly speaking, there is but one religion in the world, for there is but one God.”<sup>25</sup>

In distancing themselves from the perceived orthodoxies and ritualism of Hindu religiosity, many contemporary proponents express their spirituality through the (also Hindu) ideal of *sanātana dharma* (Eternal Truth). They use the term *sanātana dharma* to dissociate from the business and potential sectarianism of the religious category of Hinduism. In this popular view, proponents often use the term *sanātana dharma* as an indigenous alternative to the western-derived term “religion” arguing that it instead signifies a way of being, a method, a system of values, focused on the personal experience of an immanent and transcendent God. They construct *sanātana dharma* (often simply a recoding of Hinduism) as an expansive and inclusive spirituality. For example, one may accept *sanātana dharma* without altering one’s prior allegiance to a particular religion or faith. This caveat proves particularly useful when appealing to both Hindu and non-Hindu global audiences. While Hindus may be linked together through sacred geography, ethnicity, ritual actions, and an inherited wealth of religious scriptures, modern followers of *sanātana dharma* need only ascribe to a “philosophy of life,” which can coexist with a variety of religious beliefs and practices. Amma’s movement uses this categorical distinction to advocate a form of religious tolerance in which devotees are encouraged to maintain their extant religious worldviews but also fold themselves into Amma’s “spirituality.”

But beneath this ecumenical surface, one finds that *sanātana dharma* is in actuality a neo-Vedantic recoding of Hinduism. Amma’s introductory point in her speech at the 1993 Parliament of World Religions is suggestive of just how inclusivistic her conception of *sanātana dharma* becomes:

Religion is the faith which eventually culminates in the knowledge and experience that we ourselves are the all-powerful God. To lead man to the Realization of his own true state of Godhood, to transform man into God, that is the goal and purpose of Sanātana Dharma, India’s “Eternal Religion,” popularly known as Hinduism. At present, the mental lake is turbulent with the waves of thought. When these waves subside and die, that motionless substratum which

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<sup>24</sup> Goldberg, 80.

<sup>25</sup> Yogananda’s speech at the International Conference of Religious Liberals, Boston, MA (1920), cited in Goldberg, 113.

shines forth is the essence of religion, the principle subject and goal of the philosophy of Advaita (non-duality). This motionless, unchanging principle is the very foundation of Sanātana Dharma.<sup>26</sup>

Here *sanātana dharma* is a boundless signifier indexing religion, spirituality, and proto-Hinduism, all of which are subsumed under a neo-Vedantic rubric. Much like the inclusivism of liberal Protestants, to which it is often a respondent, this type of rhetoric becomes a similarly subsuming theology, a topic to which I will return shortly.

The ideology of the eternal, unchanging *sanātana dharma* combines with neo-Vedantic monism and as such subsumes difference into a meta-category that coincides with one particular Hindu sectarian ideology. In it there is no space for or acceptance of the cultural encounter of radical difference; in fact it is the very substance of multiculturalism – difference – that is undermined. The universalistic monism of neo-Vedantic philosophy, while often articulated in service of multiculturalism, interfaith dialogue, and ecumenism, is in actuality its antithesis. For example, Amma denies the actuality of diversity among individuals and religions when she asserts an underlying unity understood through a neo-Vedantic lens. She says:

“I am a Hindu”, “I am a Christian”, “I am a Muslim”, “I am an engineer”, “I am a doctor”: this is how everyone speaks. That nameless, formless, all-pervasive principle common in all as the “I” is the Atman (the Self), the Brahman (the Absolute), or Ishwara (God).

Herein lies the commonly heard neo-Vedantic solution to the variety of deities in the Hindu pantheon, first implemented widely in the modern period as a response to colonial and orientalist critiques of Hindu polytheism. But instead of smoothing over differences between Hindu Shaivites, Shaktas and Vaishnavas, here the suppression of religio-cultural differences takes on a globalized scale negotiating between “world religions.”

It is this interlocutive impulse between world religions that substantiates the displacement of the category of religion in favor of a universalistic spirituality. It has at its heart the pragmatic goal of uniting diverse (and often conflicting) ideologies. In her discourses, Amma often places the blame for wars and social injustices at the feet of religion and religious divisiveness. Speaking to the United Nations General Assembly in 2000, Amma said, “The very words ‘nation’ and ‘religion’ tend to connote division and diversity.”<sup>27</sup> Whereas “true religion” is spirituality, a spirituality that recognizes that “there is one Truth that shines through all of creation.”<sup>28</sup> In one of her most commonly employed illustrations she explains that “religion” is the husk, while “spirituality” is the “kernel.” In other words, we must shuck the external properties of religion, which

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<sup>26</sup> Amritanandamayi Ma, “May your Hearts Blossom,” 24.

<sup>27</sup> Amritanandamayi Ma, “Living in Harmony,” 20.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 23.

prevent us from enjoying its essence, spirituality. She says, "Instead of focusing on the essence of the religious principles of love and compassion, we focus on the external rituals and traditions, which vary from religion to religion. That is how these religions, which were originally meant to foster peace and a sense of unity among us, became instrumental in spreading war and conflict. If we are willing to abide by the essential principles of religions, without being overly concerned about their external features and superficial aspects, religion will become a pathway for world peace."<sup>29</sup> Thus she maintains that we must transfer emphasis from religions (plural) to spirituality (singular) in order to foster an environment that minimizes religious conflict and promotes intercultural unity. She accentuates what she believes to be the core religious values of love and compassion in order to argue for a spiritual global ethic, freed from the sectarianism and differences in orthopraxy which divide humanity into various religious allegiances. Pragmatically, Amma sees this shift in focus as a necessary component to universal peace and prosperity among the diverse populations of the world's religions.

Like her predecessors of the Hindu Renaissance and many of her contemporaries, Amma transforms the Advaita Vedantic strain of Hindu religiosity into the hallmark philosophy of Hinduism. In so doing, she propagates and reinforces the contemporary depiction of Hinduism (in its entirety) as Advaita Vedantic monism, a (mis)representation that is particularly ubiquitous in global arenas. Amma, like many other modern transnational gurus, extracts this transidiomatic theolinguistic register of universalism – exemplified through the language of spirituality – for its ease of transference and its ability to resonate with diverse audiences. She deploys Advaita Vedantic universalism alternately in the reductionistic modality as representative of the whole of Hinduism or in the disassociative modality as entirely unaffiliated with Hinduism in favor of a tenuous assertion of its roots in non-denominational spirituality.

### **Ecumenism and Tolerance**

In either case, gurus espousing the universalistic monism of Advaita Vedantic theology under the rubric of spirituality often accompany it with claims to its ecumenism and tolerance toward other religious worldviews. While modern gurus often promote ecumenism and tolerance as universalistic ideals, it does not take much probing beneath the surface to find their underlying belief that ecumenism and tolerance are, in fact, the hallmarks of a distinctively Hindu brand of spirituality. It is this ambivalence toward the category of the Hindu that reveals oscillating patterns of affiliation: non-Hindu (universalistic/spiritual) when proselytizing the particular theology of Advaita Vedanta and Hindu when appealing to often valorized humanistic ideals (ecumenism and tolerance). Are ecumenism and tolerance Hindu ideals as they are often marketed to be? Observing the religio-political advances of the Hindu right in the past thirty years, one might answer a vehement, no. But careful attention to the rhetoric of modern

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 28.

transnational gurus who derive their global followings through the implementation of a theolinguistic register of neo-Vedantic universalism might suggest a qualified, yes.

Like many debates, perhaps a closer investigation into semantics, in this case those of the Hindu use of the term 'tolerance,' may direct us toward a more productive and perhaps even more definitive answer. The Hindu vision of religious tolerance is more aptly termed "inclusivism" meaning that it validates and includes theologies and prophets from other religions. Peter van der Veer effectively argues that the Hindu conception of religious tolerance is a product of "a specific orientalist history of ideas." It is an Enlightenment discourse derived from "an abstraction and universalization of religion that is part of the Western discourse of 'modernity.'" As a doctrinal notion religious tolerance has "no specific place in Hindu discursive traditions," but it was readily incorporated so that "it has come to dominate Hindu discourse on Hinduism, to the point where tolerance is now viewed as one of the most important characteristics of Hinduism."<sup>30</sup>

Hindus not only *tolerate* other religiosities, but they incorporate them through its theological system of what Paul Hacker terms "hierarchical relativism."<sup>31</sup> This formulation depends on the theological opinion that avatars (bodily manifestations) of the One true god who is formless (Brahman) operate in different ways with different purposes on a hierarchical scale of importance. In van der Veer's language, "The general idea seems to be that the other paths do not have to be denied as heretical but that they are inferior and thus cater to inferior beings."<sup>32</sup> We can see this tendency in a multiplicity of textual and practical examples within the complexities of sectarian relations among various types of Hindus (from Shiva portrayed as a *gopī* [a female devotee of Krishna] in Braj to Rama bhakta sects subordinating Krishna to Rama). This same hierarchical relativism and inclusivism that characterizes the historical relations among Hindu sects also exemplifies the manner in which contemporary Hindus often relate to other religions. Much to the chagrin of Christian missionaries in India, Hindus demonstrate a willingness to incorporate the prophets and deities of other religions into the Hindu pantheon. Additionally, Hindus have a legacy of incorporating extra-Hindu ideas into their extensive theological corpus often demonstrating parallel themes already endemic to the scriptures of the Hindu traditions. With a tradition as diverse and multifarious as Hinduism, it is relatively easy to find nearly any theological or secular ideology somewhere in its voluminous textual history.

With regard to the contemporary Hindu claims to be the theological birthplace of religious tolerance and ecumenism, Amma again uses the concept of *sanātana dharma* in order to promote inclusivism. She says, "According to Sanātana Dharma, all religions are different pathways to the same goal. It doesn't negate anything. Everything is

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<sup>30</sup> van der Veer, 66-7.

<sup>31</sup> Cited in van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism*, 68, see also Halbfass, *India and Europe*, 403-18.

<sup>32</sup> van der Veer, 68.

included. For a Hindu there is no such thing as a separate religion. Originally, such a concept didn't exist in India."<sup>33</sup>

### Backdoor Hinduism

Amma argues for both the universalistic monism of Advaita Vedanta (iterated as non-Hindu spirituality) *and* the presumed Hindu proclivity toward religious tolerance. In essence, she attempts simultaneously to both expand and transcend the category of Hinduism. She articulates a theological position which on the surface appears to be quite ecumenical and palatable to interfaith dialogues, to which she is often invited at the most prestigious levels.<sup>34</sup> Many of her audiences, followers, and most ardent devotees truly believe that in adhering to her message, they are being "spiritual, but not religious" and that their theology exists outside the boundaries of the religion of Hinduism when in fact, the very philosophical foundations that enable them to make that self-assessment derive from within Hinduism. The Advaita Vedantic monism with which they defend their ecumenism, universalism, and religio-cultural relativism signifies Shankara's hallmark contribution to Hindu theology.

Again, even when employing the discourse of spirituality as opposed to religion, Hindu roots are not far below the surface. Amma says, "India's culture is spirituality. The origin of spirituality, though it is beginningless, to speak in empirical terms, is the *Vedas*. Therefore, to preserve, protect and spread the *Vedic dharma* is equal to preserving, protecting and spreading the moral and spiritual values of the country which will help to uplift and unify its people. This alone will protect the country from a great down-fall."<sup>35</sup> Herein, the thin veneer of non-denominational "spirituality" shows its roots to be in the *Vedas*, the foundational scriptures for much of contemporary Hindu religiosity (in name if not always in practice). Amma's statement, laced with somewhat uncharacteristic Hindu nationalistic overtones [India = Vedic "spirituality"], reveals that even her idea of spirituality (as opposed to religion) must be understood as culturally

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<sup>33</sup> Here, Amma rightly alludes to the fact that the term "religion" is a superimposed Western construct that has no direct correlate in Indic thought or languages. This point has been raised and debated among many scholars (Balagangadhara 1994, Asad 1993, Dubuisson 2003). I would also like to express gratitude to Pankaj Jain for reminding me that this entire discourse oscillating between the terms "religion," "spirituality," and "Hinduism" suggests a struggle with the modern dilemma of mapping western categories onto Indic ones. For example, if it were to adhere to indigenous Indic paradigms the discourse might focus on Sanskritic terms such as "*dharma*," "*saṃskṛti*," and "*ādhyātmika*." The fact that the terms of debate are instead "religion," "spirituality," and "Hinduism" suggests that neo-Hinduism draws its tools of identity construction from both Western and Indic sources and cannot be extricated from the development of modern Indian understandings of subjectivity which emerged in dialogue with colonial power structures. Amritanandamayi Ma, *The Eternal Truth*, 21.

<sup>34</sup> Amma has presented on collaboration between the world religions at the Parliament of World Religions (1993), at the Interfaith Celebration of the United Nations (1995), to the UN General Assembly at the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders (2000), at the Interfaith Center of New York (2006) upon her acceptance of the Fourth Annual James Parks Morton Interfaith Award, and many others.

<sup>35</sup> Swami Amritaswarupananda, *Awaken Children!* Vol. III, 297.

imbedded within a specifically Hindu cultural and discursive heritage, despite its pretense toward universality.

Many devotees wholeheartedly imbibe this categorical distancing between their spiritual worldviews and the perceived entrapments of religion and more particularly of Hinduism. They envision Amma as one who has Hindu roots, but transcends Hinduism and religion in general. One senior *brahmacāri* (renunciate aspirant), who lives at her ashram headquarters in India explained, "*She [Amma] transcends the religion, the Hindu religion as such. And personally I believe she is the best example of Hinduism – because it is an all-encompassing religion.* It welcomes everybody there. It does not say that this is the right path for you or this is the only path for you. You can worship God or not worship God, worship God in any form, name, or formless. This is total freedom. This is what Amma does. You can worship Christ and be spiritual; you can worship Rama and be spiritual. Amma exemplifies the Hindu tradition to the max. *She transcends Hinduism, she is not religious; but she represents Hinduism, the best of Hinduism.* There is nothing religious about it, merely spiritual."<sup>36</sup> Notice how he defines Amma's discursive position toward Hinduism quite accurately, explaining that she simultaneously transcends and exemplifies/represents Hinduism. There is also significance in his concluding value judgment that the "best of Hinduism" is what is spiritual, while by contrast that which is not the "best of Hinduism" must be religious. A middle-aged Euro-American Amma devotee who developed her own eclectic spirituality while living in San Francisco, the American heartland of spiritual enterprise and exploration, explained: "Religion for me is static and narrow and dogmatic...But when we get into the spiritual life and the spiritual way of living, what we call spiritual - and it's really scientific, it's really scientific – then, when we can merge ourselves and our heart with science then that will be the final [stage]."<sup>37</sup> A Syrian-American self defined "liberal Muslim" and Amma devotee iterated foundationally Advaita Vedantic principles to me when he explained that, "Truth is truth, God is God, and it is expressed in different forms vis-à-vis different traditions."<sup>38</sup>

In supplanting religion with spirituality, Amma creates a theology that resonates with many Hindus who ascribe to neo-Vedanta while simultaneously appealing to the inclusive perennialist ideologies of the variety of movements often characterized as metaphysical religions in the United States, many of which argue that "we are all essentially one; all religions point to the same truth; the globe is a whole; unity prevails within diversity."<sup>39</sup> The complex cultural encounter between proponents of neo-Vedanta and metaphysical religions in the United States not only fuels these culturally adaptive discourses, but also supports practical commonalities among populations of Indian Hindu and American spiritualist devotees who interact in many contemporary transnational guru movements.

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<sup>36</sup> Interview with Surya, San Ramon programs, June 6, 2008.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Iqbal, San Ramon programs, June 9, 2008.

<sup>39</sup> Heelas, 219.

In Amma's branding statements directed at reaching these transnational populations of potential devotees, she often translates her references to Hindu scriptures and Hindu orthopraxy into more culturally ambiguous and generalized terminology. One of the primary maxims that Amma uses, "Love and Serve" condenses her complex religious philosophy into two simple ideas, notably two ideas that make no definitive reference to her Hindu roots. Nor does her primary identity statement "Embracing The World (ETW)" (branded Summer 2009) make any reference to her Hindu roots. Instead, Amma's organization increasingly endeavors to depict her as a global spiritual teacher with a dedication to healing suffering and contributing to humanitarian causes around the world.

One might conclude then that Amma and her organization have truly globalized and with so many of her discourses emphasizing universalism and spirituality, even to the point of "transcending" religion, that she has expanded beyond her religious roots that locate her within the Hindu traditions. However, that is not the case. In fact it is quite the opposite. Amma's organization instantiates classically Hindu religious ideas, scriptural references, devotional music, and ritual practices as a matter of routine. Functionally speaking, it supports a commonplace Hindu administrative structure of *swamī-s*, *brahmachārī/ñī-s*, and *sevā-ites* (hierarchically stratified in descending layers of religious authority) as well as multiple geographic centers in her ashrams and local satsangs (congregational gatherings).<sup>40</sup> Satsangs are uniformly structured according to institutional mandate and consist of chanting *Om* (3x), chanting the *Dhyāna Śloka*, chanting the *Mātā Amṛtānandamayī Aṣṭottara Śata Nāmāvalī* (*The 108 names of Mātā Amṛtānandamayī*), chanting the *Śrī Lalitā Sahasranāmāvalī* (*The 1000 names of Śrī Lalitā*), a recitation of Amma's message (excerpted from her texts), bhajan singing, chanting of *Mahiṣāsura Mardini Stotram* (*Ayi Giri*), performance of the *arati*, and the partaking of *prasād*. Amma's large-scale public programs also routinely incorporate the full range of traditional Hindu rituals such as darshan, *pada puja*, *āratī*, *homas*, and special pujas and *yajñas*. Her movement encourages devotees to progress spiritually through daily mantra recitation, satsang attendance, in-home pujas, and by practicing Amma's patented meditation technique, Integrated Amrita Meditation (IAM). Local satsangs and ashram communities congeal the devotional community and revivify Amma's presence by sponsoring rituals on special occasions that coincide with traditional Hindu festivals and religious celebrations; many also sponsor weekend meditation and yoga retreats, public discourses, *saṅkīrtan* (collective bhajan singing), and *sevā* (selfless service) projects.

Contemporary transnational guru movements of the present, thanks to a long legacy of predecessors who broke down cultural barriers, are largely free to express their particular religiosities without consternation from the general public. While there are certainly scandals (some more warranted than others), contemporary gurus in the

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<sup>40</sup> I use the notation "*sevā-ites*" to reflect the Sanskrit root of the term, however, within the movement these volunteers are referred to with the Sanskrit/English hybrid term "sevites."

United States “have fewer doors to break down, and they no longer attract overheated media coverage and trigger extremes of rapture and hostility.”<sup>41</sup> While guru communities are still occasionally viewed askance among the general American populace, the ideas of karma yoga, hatha yoga, bhakti devotionism, and ashram retreats have become integrated into the kaleidoscopic lens of popular American alternative religiosities. But although multiculturalism and the appreciation of diversity has largely triumphed over the assimilationist paradigms which have been predominant throughout the majority of American history, still [Hindu] gurus from India have hardly changed their theologies to reflect these developments. They continue to implement the “spiritual” universalistic ecumenism of Advaita Vedanta and tuck the particularities of its Hindu religious context in the closet (especially when speaking to diverse public audiences), much like their historical predecessors.

In essence, Swami Vivekananda spoke with as of yet unchallenged authority when he created the hierarchy between the “high spiritual flights of the Vedanta philosophy” and “the low ideas of idolatry with its multifarious mythology,” which he presented to excited audiences at the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions and later to packed lecture halls across the United States. As Aravamudan notes, “The orientalist’s broad delineation and separation of philosophical doctrine from popular religion – highbrow texts from lowbrow culture – is an early version of modern Hinduism already at work.”<sup>42</sup> Here, Aravamudan points us to a key component of this puzzle: the distinction between “progressive” spirituality and “backwards” Hindu religion reifies orientalist conceptions of cultural and religious hierarchies.

That said, the orthopraxies, if not the rhetoric of contemporary gurus is changing. While still espousing the transidiomatic theolinguistic register of Advaita Vedanta, many contemporary transnational gurus have created cottage industries by offering services in particular devotional rituals, life-cycle ritual ceremonies, Vedic sacrifices (*yajñās* and *homas*), and so on. Amma’s movement, in particular, demonstrates the discordant juxtaposition between universalistic “spiritual but not religious” rhetoric derived from Advaita Vedantic sources (often espoused to audiences who are unaware of its extraction from a Hindu context) and classically Hindu ritual practices. The popular ritualism of the movement signifies the shift in the multiculturalist American public’s validation of difference, while its rhetoric of spirituality provides a blanket of security for those still uncomfortable with the influx of “foreign” religions.

In the cultural encounter between East and West, historically gurus adapted both their religious products and their rhetoric to non-Hindu audiences. Today, the product remains to some degree intact, while the rhetoric continues to adapt in order to allay fears and assuage cultural translation. The contemporary attachment to the language of spirituality, an example of the transidiomatic theolinguistic register of neo-Vedantic

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<sup>41</sup> Goldberg, 328.

<sup>42</sup> Aravamudan, 32.

universalism, signifies not the ecumenical interfaith dialogue that it often attempts to endeavor, but rather the lingering effects of the discomfort with cultural difference. Its proliferation among transnational [Hindu] gurus is ample evidence that our multicultural aspirations have not yet reached fruition as to the acceptance of others, not as essentially the same, but as fundamentally different.

## Conclusion

At this point, I would like to return to Waghorne's tripartite stratum of globalized Hinduism in the United States and question what is at stake in the discursive supplanting of Hinduism with spirituality on the global stage. Why should we take notice when modern gurus practice Hindu religiosity, but call it spirituality? For the sake of brevity, here I engage several reasons why this commonplace practice may be potentially hazardous:

- 1) Gurus are lauded for constantly reinventing the wheel; they evoke texts, philosophies, and mythological narratives from Hindu traditions but recode them under the rubric of spirituality. As such they are credited (among unknowing global audiences) as the independent generators of this cultural knowledge. The effect of this not only falsely bolsters the guru's reputation, but it also deprives non-Hindu audiences from accumulating any actual religious literacy.
- 2) If the contemporary modes of Hindu thought that are predominantly focused on love, compassion, interfaith dialogue, and largely innovative forms of globalized Hindu religiosity are recoded as "spiritual, but not Hindu," then our understanding of Hinduism is dispossessed of their contribution, which ultimately diminishes our understanding of its outstanding internal diversity.
- 3) Contemporary American audiences must develop sensibilities more nuanced than our compatriot audiences at the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions, who were largely delighted to discover in Swami Vivekananda's discourses a universalistic, ecumenical, and tolerant version of neo-Vedantic "spirituality," but rigidly opposed to the "heathen religion" of Hinduism. This type of stratified hierarchy based in the mimicry of Protestant ideals is not only outdated, but it exhibits a colonial legacy that should no longer be tolerated.
- 4) I accept Waghorne's classification of three primary modes of globalized Hinduism (liberal, conservative, and spiritual), but note that in the present circumstance, many of the 'spiritual' do not claim the meta-category of Hinduism. The effect here is that the 'liberal' factions are then situated in opposition to the 'conservative' factions as the dichotomous internal structure to globalized Hinduism. Frankly, much like liberal and conservative politics in the United States more generally, the Hindu right has an aggressive agenda, a clear and unambiguous goal, financial resources, and strong will for political activism. In the American context, the 'liberal' mode of Hindu heritage citizens simply has not been as vocal as the 'conservative.' Without a 2:1 ratio, I fear that the conservative modality will surely win the day.

- 5) If underlying orientalism and the intolerance of true cultural difference continue to demand the recoding of much of Hindu religiosity into the language of spirituality, then we may unwittingly create the foundations for a fearsome form of religion that will call itself Hindu, a form that feels it must distinguish itself from the discourses of "spirituality" by claiming its authenticity through the defining characteristics of its presumed antitheses: fundamentalism, orthodoxy, and intolerance. And as so many young South Asian immigrants search for tools with which to represent an "authentic" Hindu identity, this may be a dire consequence indeed.

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# Contesting Hindu Material and Visual Cultures, Forging Hindu American Identity and Subjectivity

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## Abstract

Based on the 2010 Census, there are roughly 1.85 million Indian Americans residing in the United States.<sup>1</sup> They comprise the third largest Asian American community in the U.S., following the Chinese and Filipino Americans. Indian cultural influence in America dates back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, and has deep and rich roots.<sup>2</sup> Western culture admires yoga, the Eastern concepts of internal and external peace, sexual chastity, and vegetarianism, yet, at the same time, it fancies products like flip-flops, underwear, and doormats sporting images of Hindu icons. Are these two fads contradictory or do they illustrate something about the interplay among modernity, secularization, and religion? The West likes to consume everything Hindu, from *nag champa* incense to Hindu icons and the *Bhagavad Gita*. Recent trends reveal problematic misappropriation of Hindu icons for sale in unexpected and uncommon places (i.e., bikinis and flip-flops shoes). What is the interplay between Hindu/Hindu American activism against capitalistic misappropriation of Hindu icons and their subjectivity and identity? How can we analyze and re-think assumptions about the secularization thesis? The examples analyzed in this article provide rich material to re-think modernity

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau

[http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=DEC\\_10\\_DP\\_DPDP1&prodType=table](http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=DEC_10_DP_DPDP1&prodType=table) (last accessed May 30, 2011).

Indian Americans are people of Indian origin who have migrated to the United States since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, either directly from India or from Indian communities in the diaspora (e.g., Europe, Australia, Middle East, Southeast Asia, South Africa). Indian Americans—also known as “Asian Indian,” “Eastern Indian Americans,” and “South Asians”—are generally considered part of the broad heterogeneous umbrella label “Asian American.”

<sup>2</sup> During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Indian traders came to the United States carrying silk, linens, and spices. The early immigrants during this period were largely Sikhs who came as railroad workers and agricultural laborers because of severe famine and impoverishment in the Punjab region of northern India. During the same time, many Indians came to the United States in pursuit of higher education and later immigrated permanently when they secured jobs. Historically, there has also been a large migration of Indian professionals to the United States, such as doctors, engineers, researchers, etc., creating a “brain drain” in India. Immigrants who became legal residents and citizens often brought their siblings, parents, and other family members as well. While the early Indian immigrants were concentrated only in few larger American cities (Chicago, San Francisco) and states (California), Indian families and large Indian communities exist in every state.

and its insistence on secularization, even if it employs Hindu religious iconography. The purpose of this article is not to “explain” Hindu/Hindu American protests, but rather to investigate the questions it evokes.<sup>3</sup> Hindu/Hindu American activism against the corporatization and fetishization of their Hindu deities critiques the logic of capitalism, while simultaneously giving rise to a Hindu/Hindu American identity and subjectivity.

## Introduction

This essay explores misappropriations of Hindu icons on popular garments and items that are mass produced for retail. The foci of this research are two contemporary cases, one involving American Eagle Outfitters (AEO), the other the globally popular fast-food conglomerate, McDonald’s. An investigation of material culture, in particular material religion, requires critical engagement with the secularization thesis that sees the disappearance of religion with modernity that ultimately results in the secularization of daily life. It also questions the fundamental assumption of the secularization thesis apropos modern society, and reveals its shortcomings. The secularization thesis does not account for the affinity between capitalistic consumer culture and religion. In short, it does not account for the fact that religion can be “for sale.” This is not a new fact about religion. It also overlooks the role of people who make decisions and who are consumers of religion, implicitly or explicitly when it is for sale. The two case studies are anchored by a critical exploration of secularization and consumption, further grounding the theoretical framework of this study. The aim is not to interpret the actions and motivations of Hindus/Hindu Americans, but rather, to question and re-think the discourse on modernity and its relationship to religion. The examination of Hindu material religion and both the successful and unsuccessful attempts to sell it in the global market place brings into question the shortcomings in the secularization thesis, and the ways in which ethnic and religious identities inform the logic of capitalism. Hindu and Hindu American protest of corporate misappropriation of Hindu deities is simultaneously a critique of the secularization thesis and the logic of capitalism and is an expression of Hindu ethnicity and subjectivity.

## Secularization Thesis and Material Religion

The discourse on modernity and secularization is often anchored to the relationship between the state and religion. For example, Giorgio Agamben<sup>4</sup> and Michel

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<sup>3</sup> Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

Foucault<sup>5</sup> provide critiques of modernity's narrative vis-à-vis sovereignty and biopower, which, when applied to the condition of religion in modern societies, brings up questions concerning the relationship of religion to the state. Both Agamben and Foucault view modernity critically, prompting us to reconsider the alleged "progress" made with modernization. However, Agamben calls upon us to not forget state sovereignty and the violence that it is capable of stimulating, while Foucault paints a picture of a new form of discipline in modern life and society that is oppressive. Both authors are discontent with modernity, both see biopolitics emerging—although different versions of it—becoming increasingly tragic and manipulative on modern subjects.<sup>6</sup> They reject the Enlightenment discourse of progress, reason, emancipation, and argue that in modernity, new forms of power and knowledge have resulted in new forms of domination.

Although Agamben and Foucault are dissatisfied with the conditions of modernity, they do not discuss what happens after modernity. For this, we turn to Georges Bataille in *The Accursed Share*.<sup>7</sup> Characterizing the modern condition with an emphasis on Weberian rationality, Bataille's dissatisfaction with modernity extends to the notions of rational production and consumption, compared to archaic society where there is a consumptive behavior beyond utility, which he equates with "sovereignty."<sup>8</sup> Bataille's notion of sovereignty is not politically defined. He sees sovereignty as an issue of consumption, in which the sovereign individual consumes but does not labor. Bataille laments modern man's inability to grasp and understand the attraction of the sovereign power of the past, attributing it to our necessity to understand our acts in rational terms. He sees the ability to lose oneself in moments of consumption or enjoyment as "moments of sovereignty."<sup>9</sup> Moments of sovereignty are described as being akin to ". . .

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<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–1979*, translated by Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> For Foucault, biopolitics or biopower is a technology that appeared in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century for managing populations, incorporating some aspects of disciplinary power or non-sovereign power, which he argued regulates the behaviors of individuals within the social body. By changing his emphasis from discipline to biopolitics, Foucault shifts his discourse from one of training, normalizing, naturalizing the actions of bodies to focus on managing the births, deaths, reproductive processes, and illnesses of a population. Foucault sees biopolitics as a consequence of governmentality, which is a mode of thinking toward government that started to emerge in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, first as art of government, and later, as a full-fledged government.

<sup>7</sup> Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share, Volumes II & III*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> Bataille sees the outcome of the Marxist project (Stalinism and communism) as more disturbing than bourgeois surplus. With bourgeois surplus, the state takes surplus from the laborer and makes decisions on what to do with the surplus, a moment of caprice or whim; with state socialism, there is a totally planned rational economy, and the state makes decisions on how workers will live and what workers can do, which becomes a total society of necessity.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

deeply rhythmed movements of poetry, of music, of love, of dance . . . . The miraculous moment when anticipation dissolves into NOTHING.”<sup>10</sup>

Bataille and Foucault both find the pre-modern sovereign power appealing because there was a collective effort of non-productive build-up of access to the divine, which everyone gets to enjoy; however, in modern capitalist society, no one gets to enjoy it. Bataille is on to something when he discusses consumption, because in ancient China and India there were consumptive laws, laws regulating ritual offerings, clothing and dress—which juxtaposes social status with degrees of consumption and levels of sacredness. Modernization shatters this hierarchy. More importantly, Bataille suggests that the game is not over because modern subjects are able to discover sovereign moments within the system. Examining material culture, especially religious representation in material pop culture, is only tangentially related to the state if one takes for granted the state’s role and support of capitalism. However, one wonders if the purchase of flip-flops and bikinis with Hindu icons on them are examples of the moment of sovereignty that Bataille is referring to? Hindu/Hindu American protests of AEO and McDonald’s are indirect critiques of the state in that they are acts of decolonization, because historically the state was the primary colonial agent. Is this act of consumer protest a moment of sovereignty as well?

### What Things Reveal

Material culture refers to the design, construction, modification, and use of physical objects to both create and express meaning within a culture. In studying the material culture of Hindu American communities, all things are significant expressions of meaning—from the literal contents of religious icons purchased at the local mall or ethnic store, from slippers to saris, from a dozen types of rice to curries, and from Hindu home shrines to mega temples.

Material culture can serve as a means of resistance to forces of globalization and homogeneity. The wearing of traditional clothing or the incorporation of design elements into non-traditional items of apparel—such as henna designs or turbans—publicly signals a preservation of identity. Material culture can also constitute or bolster new hybrid cultural forms, such as when, out of economic necessity, immigrant Hindu American communities pool resources to create a *mandir* (temple) to house deities that in India would not be enshrined together. Very different combinatory impulses are displayed in the creation of Indian salsa or in Indian American hip-hop culture, in which non-traditional musical instruments and modes—as well as fashion and marketing strategies—are expressively employed. The problem is not with the marketing of Hindu material culture per se, but rather, with the producers of the products for sale. Are they Hindu/Hindu American or corporations? The disdain for one, and support for the other reveals the logic of capitalism that underlies the formation of Hindu/Hindu American

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

subjectivity and identity. It is logical in modern society for Hindus/Hindu Americans to market and sell material Hinduism, but not acceptable for corporations, especially those that are not self-identified Hindu. Does this mean that everything is not available for sale? If so, what does it say about the secularization thesis and about the actors who will not purchase Hindu material culture produced by a corporation?

### Material Hinduism for Sale?

America has been fascinated with Hinduism since the late 1950s *a la* the Beatles and other notable personalities as they traveled to Rishikesh in pursuit of mystical experiences and enlightenment.<sup>11</sup> Recently, America's "enhancement" with Hinduism is expressed in the 2011 November cover of *The Newsweek*, which depicts President Barack Obama in a dancing Lord Siva pose with the title, "God of All Things." In 2008 the former fashion model and reality game show TV hostess, Heidi Klum, dressed up as the goddess Kali for Halloween.<sup>12</sup> Hindus worldwide criticized Klum's costume, while fans and non-Hindus supported her freedom of self-expression. There is a series of controversy involving the use of Hindu icons on mundane objects, protested by Hindu Human Rights organizations as well as other Hindu American organizations. The worldwide campaign to protest cases of corporate transgressions in using Hindu deities include, for example, the challenge of Roberto Cavalli's bikinis in England featuring the likeness of the goddess Lakshmi;<sup>13</sup> lunchboxes.com's use of images of the goddesses Durga and Kali and gods Krishna and Ganesha on children's lunch boxes; and the image of goddess Kali on toilet seats. In the U.S, they challenged Lost Coast Brewery's depiction of Ganesha on an India Pale Ale beer bottle;<sup>14</sup> Monarch Beverages' use of a distorted image of Siva on its energy drink; and CafePress.com's sale of thongs bearing the sacred Om symbol and images of Siva. These cases illustrate several things about Hinduism in the West, in particular in America: 1) Westerners are enchanted with Hinduism; 2) there is a market for Hinduism in the western world; 3) the archetypal secularization thesis on the disappearance of religion with progress and modernity is, once again, questioned.

Hindus have expressed their displeasure and dissatisfaction with the misappropriation of Hindu icons on toilet seats, thongs, and bikinis. Corporate and capitalist misappropriation of Hindu icons represents a form of cultural colonization and secularization that is problematic for Hindus and Hindu Americans. Naresh Kadyan says,

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<sup>11</sup> Jane Naomi Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 5.

<sup>12</sup> "Heidi as Goddess Kali" <http://www.potlee.com/divine-intervention/heidi-as-godess-kali/> (last accessed May 30, 2011)

<sup>13</sup> Vinita Dawra Nangia "Was Goddess Lakshmi on bikini a deliberate ploy?" *The Times of India* (May 17, 2011); and Hindu Human Rights <http://www.hinduhumanrights.org/campaign.html> (last accessed May 30, 2011)

<sup>14</sup> Sonia Chopra, "Stop insulting South Asia—Indian American sues firm over Lord Ganesha's picture on beer bottle" *India Daily* (May 19, 2005). <http://www.indiadaily.com/editorial/2783.asp> (last accessed May 30, 2011)

"You don't have to be religious to feel disgusted at seeing a picture of Goddess Lakshmi on a bikini bottom. It is simply disrespectful and cheap."<sup>15</sup> Kadyan's comments reveal an anxiety about the fetishization of Hinduism, as well as the attempt to decolonize Hinduism, especially since secularization in India occurred through colonization. Therefore, in the post-colonial historical context, an Indian American law student who filed a lawsuit against Lost Coast Brewery for "hurting the sentiments of Hindus worldwide" reveals aspects of Hindu American agency and attempts to decolonize their religious traditions and subjectivities.<sup>16</sup>

This article explores the clash between Hindus/Hindu Americans and corporate America. In particular it will focus on two case studies involving AEO and McDonald's, apropos the Hindu American community. This examination reveals how activism informs the interplay between Hindu icons, ethnic and religious identities, and Hindu American subjectivity. It also argues that exploration of material culture, in things that are not overtly religious (i.e., French fries) provides data to critically engage and analyze the secularization thesis that religion and other folk traditions will disappear with modernization and historical progress. Moreover, it illustrates that patterns of modern consumerism do not follow the linear logic of rational capitalism, but instead is informed by issues of ethnicity and identity.

The academic study of Hinduism in America has received considerable attention, especially as documented in the narrative and institutional history of Hinduism in America.<sup>17</sup> However, anyone interested in the topic at hand faces formidable difficulties in terms of the paucity of available published works investigating Hindu American (and Asian American) material and visual culture.<sup>18</sup>

### **American Eagle Outfitters**

In April 2003 the popular teen and young adult clothing company, American Eagle Outfitters (AEO), introduced flip-flops with the image of Ganesha in its summer

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<sup>15</sup> Naresh Kadyan, "Respect be given to the Hindu's God and Goddess" Care2petitionsite <http://www.thepetitionsite.com/1/respect-be-given-to-the-hindus-god-and-goddess/> (last accessed May 30, 2011)

<sup>16</sup> Chopra, "Stop insulting South Asia—Indian American sues firm over Lord Ganesha's picture on beer bottle"

<sup>17</sup> For example: Wendell Thomas, *Hinduism Invades America* (Kessinger Publishing 2003); Sunrit Mullick, *The First Hindu Mission to America: The Pioneering Visits of Protap Chunder Mozoomdar* (New Delhi: Northern Book Centre, 2010); Gerald James Larson, "Hinduism in India and in America" *World Religions in America: An Introduction*, Jacob Neusner, ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009); and Elizabeth Reed, *Hinduism in Europe and America* (Forgotten Books, 2010).

<sup>18</sup> Related to material culture is Jaideep Singh's "The Racialization of Minoritized Religious Identity: Constructing Sacred Sites at the Intersection of White and Christian Supremacy" *Revealing the Sacred in Asian & Pacific America*, edited by Jane Naomi Iwamura and Paul Spickard. New York: Routledge, 2003, pp. 87–106.

line.<sup>19</sup> Ganesha is the elephant-headed god who is the son of Siva and Parvati; he is one of the more widely venerated Hindu deities because he is believed to be able to remove any obstacle. Immediately after releasing the Ganesha flip-flops, two Indian American community organizations, IndiaCause and American Hindus against Defamation (AHAD), launched a campaign to recall and remove all the flip-flops from the 929 retail AEO stores and its online catalog.<sup>20</sup>

AHAD complained that, since Ganesha is a popular Hindu god, his likeness on flip-flops is a transgression against his sacredness because the feet are considered populated. A Hindu blogger who signed the petition writes:

I was taught growing up not to put your feet on or towards God, but now his image is on the sole of somebody's shoes! I don't think Jesus print[ed on] toilet paper would go over well in the Christian community so why do they feel this is acceptable?<sup>21</sup>

A Hare Krishna devotee added that Hare Krishnas protested AEO as well, fearing that the next round of flip-flops will have Krishna's likeness on it.<sup>22</sup> Shortly after the successful petition and a protest in front of several retail stores, on April 29, 2003, Vice President and General Counsel for AEO, Neil Bulman, issued a public apology stating:

Pursuant to your request, this letter follows up on the email to you yesterday from our customer service department, which confirmed that American Eagle Outfitters will remove from its stores the flip-flop shoe that include [sic] a likeness of Lord Ganesh (Ganesha).

Our goal at American Eagle Outfitters is to make AE-brand merchandise that is fashionable and affordable for our customers in an inclusive and equitable environment. We value diversity and respect the ideal of freedom of expression of all religious and cultural beliefs.

On behalf of American Eagle Outfitters, please accept this letter as our formal apology for our use of the image resembling Lord Ganesh on this product. Again, this letter confirms that we will remove these flip flop shoes from our stores in order to maintain the good will and our customer relations with the Hindu community.

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<sup>19</sup> American Eagle Outfitters targets 15–25 year old girls and guys. It ships to 76 countries worldwide and maintains 929 stores in the U.S. and Canada. American Eagle Outfitters <http://www.ae.com/web/index.jsp> (last accessed May 30, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> IndiaCause Facebook <http://www.facebook.com/pages/India-Cause/110923362272524#!/pages/India-Cause/110923362272524?sk=info> (last accessed May 30, 2011). IndiaCause is one of the leading Indian websites for News, Resources, Information, Analysis, and Activism.

<sup>21</sup> IndiaDivine.org <http://www.indiadinive.org/audarya/spiritual-discussions/32490-shoes-hindu-god-images.html> (last accessed May 30, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> IndiaDivine.org (last accessed May 30, 2011).

We appreciate your interest in the AE brand and hope that you will continue to be satisfied customers of American Eagle Outfitters.<sup>23</sup>

AHAD notes that this campaign is the fastest-growing protest petition in its history. It gathered more than 4,200 online signatures in 36 hours and 250 signed-signatures on paper.<sup>24</sup>

Other cases and protests have not been as successful. The lunchbox.com protest, led by Hindu Human Rights, did not receive an apology or a removal of its products from its online store. Instead, when Hindu Human Rights met with D.J. Jayasekara, managing director and designer of lunchbox.com, Jayasekara claimed, "there is a market for these designs," adding that he would ". . . continue to supply that market regardless of the offence . . . [it] causes to Hindus worldwide."<sup>25</sup> The lunch boxes are marketed as "bringing beauty and mystery to your mid-day meal with the alluring, but deadly, Kali lunchboxes."<sup>26</sup> Hindu and Hindu American complaints against these lunchboxes were based squarely on religious ideology and ethnic-cultural nationalism: 1) the lunch boxes render Hinduism a commodity when Hindus see it as deeply religious and personal; 2) the lunch boxes prorogate and promote religious transgression as Hindus and their gods are vegetarians, but non-Hindus may unknowingly place meat products in the lunchboxes; 3) they feel that this type of mundane and secular appropriation of images of sacred Hindu deities reinforces stereotypes and Orientalizes Hindus and Hindu Americans. On the other hand, there are others who do not view these lunch boxes as deliberate attempts to defame or attack Hinduism per se. Instead, they understand it in strictly capitalistic terms as lunchbox.com's attempt to engage consumers with the "exotic" and the "other."<sup>27</sup> "Such marketing tricks aim at shocking and then holding the probable consumer's attention. It is a way of jolting the consumer by providing him the forbidden."<sup>28</sup>

This controversy illustrates the importance of Hindu icons among self-identified Hindus and Hindu Americans. The visual and material religious culture is expressively connected to the formation of their identities—religious and ethnic—which they perceived as being misappropriated with Ganesha's image on flip-flops. The understanding and verbalization that it is a religious transgression since it encourages

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<sup>23</sup> "AHAD Claims Partial Victory in American Eagle Outfitters Flip Flop/Lord Ganesh Depiction Issue" *Hindu Vishwa: Voice of Hindus in North America* 30:2 (April-June 2003).

<sup>24</sup> "AHAD Claims Partial Victory in American Eagle Outfitters Flip Flop/Lord Ganesh Depiction Issue" 15.

<sup>25</sup> India Divine.org <http://www.indiadinive.org/audarya/hinduism-forum/178773-defamation-against-hindus-around-globe.html> (last accessed May 30, 2011): 15–16.

<sup>26</sup> Religion News Blog "Indian Deities, Western Products: Ignorance or Crass Marketing?" <http://www.religionnewsblog.com/9007/indian-deities-western-products-ignorance-or-crass-marketing> (last accessed May 30, 2011).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

the pollution (i.e., feet) of a pure entity (i.e., Ganesha) is telling. Hindus and Hindu Americans understand the act of selling and wearing these flip-flops as a form of colonization of Hinduism and, by extension, their subjectivity and identity by non-Hindus, by capitalism, and by the western world. The Hindu and Hindu American protest against AEO and its victory is an example of acts of decolonization among Hindus both in India and within the diaspora. Moreover, it says something about the logic of capitalism and its attempt to market and sell religion in modern society. A logic that did not take into account the power of ethnic and religious identity, which, employed critically and forcibly, can put capitalism in its place.

### **McDonald's French Fries**

In May 2003 McDonald's settled a law suit with several Hindu and other vegetarian religious and non-religious organizations for misrepresenting their French fries as "vegetarian." This case began in 1990 with Harish Bharti, a vegetarian Hindu American and Seattle-based lawyer, who had the habit of identifying the ingredients in his putatively vegetarian food. During this period, fast food franchises such as McDonald's, Wendy's, and Burger King advertised that they were switching from the use of beef tallow to vegetable oil to fry their foods. Since the new French fries did not taste like the fries cooked in beef tallow, McDonald's added beef flavoring in processing French fries to maintain its popular flavor profile. McDonald's followed U.S. government food guidelines that allowed labeling the new fries as possessing "natural flavor"—which is truthful. However, because of the hype over the switch to vegetable oil for frying, vegetarians assumed that the new and improved fries were "vegetarian." Hence, the accusation of false advertising by McDonald's from its vegetarian customers.

Bharti sued McDonald's in 2001, and that grew into a law suit involving a number of lawyers and vegetarian organizations. Ultimately, Hindus, Sikhs, Jews, Muslims, vegetarians, and vegans joined the law suit—the Jews because the beef flavoring was not kosher and the Muslims because it was not *halal*. In 2002 McDonald's settled the suit by agreeing to a 10 million dollar settlement and a formal public apology. The apology read, in part,

McDonald's sincerely apologizes to Hindus, vegetarians and others for failing to provide the kind of information they needed to make informed dietary decisions at our U.S. restaurants. We acknowledge that, upon our switch to vegetable oil in the early 1990s for the purpose of reducing cholesterol, mistakes were made in communicating to the public and customers about the ingredients in our French fries and hash browns. Those mistakes

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included instances in which French fries and hash browns sold at U.S. restaurants were improperly identified as “vegetarian.”<sup>29</sup>

Part of the settlement required that the full apology be printed in *Veggie Life*, *India Tribune*, and *Hinduism Today*. Hindu groups that received a settlement from this lawsuit include: Hindu Students Council (\$500,000); Hinduism Today Endowment (\$250,000); Council of Hindu Temples of North America (\$200,000); Sri Siva Vishnu (SSV) Temple (\$50,000); and International/American Gita Society (\$50,000).<sup>30</sup>

Some may question the fuss made over McDonald’s French fries having a little coating of beef flavoring. Is the fuss rational? Consider that cows are sacred animals in India, and that Krishna, a beloved and popular Hindu god, is at the center of religious texts that expresses admiration for the cows. In these tales, Krishna is represented as a cow herder. From these tales, Krishna is represented as a *gopala*, which translates to the Lord of Cows.<sup>31</sup> Krishna is also identified with *govinda*, who is “the one who brings satisfaction to the cows.”<sup>32</sup> Shereen Bella notes that “even the popular McDonald’s chain in India carries no beef.”<sup>33</sup> Does cultural acknowledgement and awareness explain the protest against McDonald’s beef-flavored French fries?

Some may argue that the case against McDonald’s is more critical because of the real and immediate religious transgressions that unaware Hindus and Hindu Americans may inadvertently commit should they consume the French fries that are not vegetarian. Even after the lawsuit was settled, McDonald’s continued to coat French fries with beef flavoring. However, the lawsuit reveals something about Hindu and Hindu American subjectivity and agency. It may also be interpreted by some as an act

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<sup>29</sup> “McDonald’s Fries: Not Done Yet: \$10 Million Settlement—including \$250,000 for Hinduism Today—appealed” *Hinduism Today* <http://www.hinduismtoday.com/modules/smartsection/item.php?itemid=3811> (last accessed May 30, 30110)

<sup>30</sup> *Hinduism Today* (last accessed May 30, 30110).

Other claimants include Guru Harkrishan Institute of Sikh Studies (\$50,000); Islamic Food and Nutrition Council of America (\$450,000); Muslim Consumer Group for Food Products (\$100,000); Jewish Community Centers Association (\$200,000); Star-K/Torah.Org (\$300,000); Orthodox Union (\$150,000); The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life (Hillel) (\$300,000); CLAL (\$50,000); Vegetarian Resource Group (\$1,400,000); North American Vegetarian Society (\$1,000,000); ADAF Vegetarian Nutrition Dietetic Practice Group (\$600,000); Preventive Medicine Research Institute (\$550,000); American Vegan Society (\$500,000); Loma Linda University (\$300,000); Vegetarian Vision, Inc. (\$250,000); Supporting Excellence in Education (\$900,000); Tufts University (\$850,000); Produce for Better Health Foundation (\$500,000); Division of Nutrition and Physical Activity at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (“CDC”) (\$500,000);

An appeal was dismissed in June 2005, and the final disbursement made during the first week of July, 2005.

<sup>31</sup> Shereen Bella, “Indian Americans: Nature and Animals” *Encyclopedia of Asian American Folklore and Folklife*, edited by Jonathan H. X. Lee and Kathleen M. Nadeau. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO Press, 2011, pp. 500–501.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

of decolonization, which may be interpreted as, invoking Bataille, a moment of sovereignty in modern life.

### **Why Things Matter**

The Hindu activists discontent with AEO is rooted in the belief that placing one's foot upon the image of a deity is considered extremely disrespectful in the same way their discontent with McDonalds is based upon the belief that the corporation is being insensitive to Hindu religious and cultural sensitivities. The activists are also informed by issues concerning religious piety and the respect for Hinduism which drives the protesters' expressions of ethnic identity and cultural nationalism. Objects with Hindu religious icons matter—or should matter—to us because it is not only about Hinduism per se, or religious transgressions or religious piety. Instead, these things matter because it makes known the power of ethnic identity and cultural nationalism in our modern world. For Hindus and Hindu Americans, as well as for Sikh Americans, Muslim Americans, Christian and Jewish Americans, religious identity and ethnic identity are fused together. The Enlightenment project of progress and movement toward secularization did not account for the growth and centrality of ethnic and religious identity and identity politics. Does this mean that secularization is impossible? Identity is tied to subjectivity: Subjectivity is fundamentally about life and survival. The images of Ganesha on flip-flops or Sri Lakshmi on bikinis and toilet seats are not religious transgressions, but rather, attacks on Hindu and Hindu American identity and subjectivity. Just as the attack on 9/11 is not a religious act, but rather on attack on American identity and subjectivity, that is, the life style that we represent—capitalism. The assassination of Osama bin Laden on May 2, 2011 is not religious, nor is it an act of revenge, but an act of displaying American identity and subjectivity. These things, in and of themselves, do not symbolize the importance of ethnic and, by extension, religious identity and subjectivity; rather, it is what we do with or to the things that is revealing.

### **Conclusion**

The goal of this article is to question current discourses concerning the relationship between modernity and religion. I draw upon the critiques of modernization by Agamben, Foucault, and Bataille who all argue that modernity has created power structures which use coercion and domination to take away individual autonomy in all areas of life including the marketplace. This critique of modernity, can be challenged by Hindu/Hindu American responses to the (mis)appropriation by corporate America of Hindu deities for the marketing of footwear and corporate marketing of fast-food products which claim to be 'vegetarian' when in fact they are flavored with beef. The success of Hindu/Hindu American organizations in receiving written apologies and financial settlements from corporate America underlines three points: The first point is that the success of Hindu activists in challenging corporate America's insensitivity to their religious values is indicative of a moment in which individuals can indeed exercise

their own authority over the choices they make in the marketplace. The second point is that choices made in the marketplace by both consumers and producers are not shaped purely by the dictates of capitalism but also by religious and cultural issues, especially by ethnic and religious identities. The third, and final point, is that the success of Hindu activists prove that religion is still an influential force in society and that the secularization thesis, which holds that religion will cease to exist in the face of progress and modernity, has failed to be proven correct.